

THE WINNER

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DAVID BALDACCI

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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 sapling such that if LuAnn had looked head-on into the mirror she would have seen not one but three faces in the reflection.

LuAnn didn't smile as she studied herself; she could never really remember smiling at her appearance. Her looks were her only asset—that had been beaten into her head ever since she could remember—although she could have used some dental work. Growing up on unfluoridated well water and never stepping foot inside a dentist's office had contributed to that situation.

No smarts, of course, her father had said over and over. No smarts, or no opportunity to use them? She had never broached the subject with Benny Tyler, dead now these past five years. Her mother, Joy, who had passed away almost three years ago, had never been happier than after her husband died. That should have completely dispelled Benny Tyler's opinions of her mental ability, but little girls believed what their daddy told them, mostly unconditionally.

She looked over to the wall where the clock hung. It was the only thing she had of her mother's; a family heirloom of sorts, as it had been given to Joy Tyler by her own mother on the day she married Benny. It had no intrinsic value; you could buy one in any pawnshop for ten bucks. Yet LuAnn treasured it. As a little girl LuAnn had listened to the slow, methodical ticks of that clock far into the night. Knowing that in the middle of all the darkness it would always be there, it would always soothe her into sleep and greet her in the morning. Throughout her growing up it had been one of her few anchoring points. It had a connection, too, in that it went back to her grandmother, a woman LuAnn

had adored. Having that clock around was like having her grandmother around forever. As the years had gone by, its inner workings had worn down considerably so that it produced unique sounds. It had carried LuAnn through more bad times than good, and right before Joy died she had told LuAnn to take it, to take good care of it. And now LuAnn would keep it for her daughter.

She pulled her thick auburn hair straight back, tried a bun, and then dexterously knotted a French braid. Not satisfied with either of these looks, she finally piled her thick tresses on top and secured them with a legion of bobby pins, frequently cocking her head to test the effect. At five feet ten inches tall, she also had to stoop to see herself in the mirror.

Every few seconds she looked over at the small bundle on the chair next to her. She smiled as she took in the droopy eyes, the curved mouth, the chipmunk cheeks, and doughy fists. Eight months and growing up fast. Her daughter had already started to crawl with the funny, back-and-forth gyrations of infancy. Walking would soon replace that. LuAnn stopped smiling as she looked around. It would not take Lisa long to navigate the boundaries of this place. The interior, despite LuAnn's diligent efforts to keep it clean, resembled the exterior largely due to the temperamental outbursts of the man sprawled on the bed. Duane Harvey had twitched once or twice since staggering into the house at four A.M., throwing off his clothes, and climbing into bed, but otherwise he had remained motionless. She recalled fondly that on one night early in their relationship, Duane had not come home drunk: Lisa had been the result. Tears glimmered for the briefest time in LuAnn's hazel eyes. She hadn't much time or sympathy for tears, particularly her own. At twenty years of age she had already cried enough of them to last her until the end of her days, she figured.

She turned back to the mirror. While one of her hands played with Lisa's tiny fist, LuAnn used the other to pull out all the bobby pins. She swept her hair back and then let her bangs fall naturally forward over her high forehead. It was a style she had worn in school, at least through the seventh grade, when she had

joined many of her friends in the rural county in dropping out and seeking work and the paycheck that came with it. They had all thought, wrongly as it turned out, that a regular paycheck beat the hell out of an education any day of the week. For LuAnn, there hadn't been much choice. Half her wages went to help her chronically unemployed parents. The other half went to pay for things her parents couldn't afford to give her, such as food and clothes.

She eyed Duane carefully as she undid her tattered robe, revealing her naked body. Seeing no sign of life from him, she swiftly pulled on her underwear. As she grew up, her blossoming figure had been a true eye-opener for the local boys, making them press for manhood even before the natural order of things would allow them official entry.

LuAnn Tyler, the movie-star-slash-supermodel-to-be. Many of the residents of Rikersville County, Georgia, had thoroughly considered the issue of LuAnn and bestowed upon her that title, weighted down as it was with the highest of expectations. She was not long for their way of life, it was plain to see, proclaimed the wrinkled, thick local women holding court on their broad, decaying porches, and no one disagreed with them. The natural beauty she possessed would hold out for nothing less than the glossiest of all brass rings. She was the vicarious hope for the locals. New York or maybe Los Angeles would beckon to *their* LuAnn, it was only a matter of time. Only she was still here, still in the very same county where she had lived all her life. She was a disappointment of sorts without ever—despite being barely out of her teens—having had the opportunity to realize any of her goals. She knew the townsfolk would have been surprised to realize that her ambitions did not include lying naked in bed next to Hollywood's hunk of the month or treading the models' catwalk wearing the latest creations of the haute couture crowd. Although, as she slipped into her bra, it occurred to her that, right about now, sliding into the latest fashions in exchange for ten thousand dollars a day was not such a bad deal.

Her face. And her body. Her father had often commented on

that attribute too. Voluptuous, full-figured, he had described it, as though it were an entity distinct from her. Weak mind, dazzling body. Thankfully, he had never gone beyond those verbalizations. Late at night she sometimes wondered if he had ever wanted to but simply lacked the courage or the opportunity. Sometimes the way he would look at her. On rare occasions, she would venture into the deepest parts of her subconscious and sense, like the sudden, scary prick of a needle, the disjointed pieces of a memory that made her wonder if the opportunity maybe had presented itself. At that point she would always shudder and tell herself that thinking such evil of the dead was not a good thing.

She studied the contents of the small closet. Really, she owned only one dress that would be appropriate for her appointment. The short-sleeve, navy blue with white trim around the collar and hemline. She remembered the day she bought it. A whole paycheck blown. *Sixty-five entire dollars*. That was two years ago and she had never repeated that insane extravagance, in fact it was the last dress she had bought. The garment was a little frayed now, but she had done a nice touch-up job with needle and thread. A strand of small, fake pearls, a birthday gift from a former admirer, encircled her long neck. She had stayed up late methodically coloring in the nicks on her only pair of high heels. They were dark brown and didn't match the dress but they would have to do. Flip-flops or sneakers, her only other two choices, were not going to cut it today, although she would wear the sneakers on the mile-long trek to the bus stop. Today could be the start of something new, or at least different. Who knew? It could lead to somewhere, anywhere. It could carry her and Lisa away to something other than the Duanes of the world.

LuAnn took a deep breath, opened up the zippered interior pocket of her purse, and carefully unfolded the piece of paper. She had written down the address and other information from the phone call from someone who had identified himself as a Mr. Jackson, a call she had almost not answered after pulling the midnight to seven shift as a waitress at the Number One Truck Stop.

When the phone call came LuAnn's eyes had been welded shut as she sat on the kitchen floor breast-feeding Lisa. The little girl's teeth were coming in and LuAnn's nipples felt like they were on fire, but the baby formula was too damn expensive and they were out of milk. At first, LuAnn had no desire to answer the phone. Her job at the popular truck stop right off the interstate kept her running nonstop, with Lisa meanwhile tucked safely under the counter in her baby seat. Luckily, the little girl could hold a bottle and the diner's manager liked LuAnn enough that the arrangement hadn't jeopardized her position. They didn't get many calls. Mostly Duane's buddy looking for him to go drinking or strip a few cars that had broken down on the highway. Their Bud and Babe money they called it, and often right to her face. No, it was not Duane's boys calling this early. Seven A.M. would find them three hours into the deep sleep of another drinking binge.

After the third ring, for some reason, her hand had reached out and plucked up the phone. The man's voice was crisp and professional. He had sounded as though he were reading from a script and her sleep-clouded mind had pretty much reasoned that he was trying to sell her something. That was a joke! No charge cards, no checking account, just the little bit of cash hung in a plastic bag inside the hamper she used for Lisa's dirty diapers. It was the only place Duane would never search. Go ahead, mister, you just try to sell me something. Credit card number? Well let me just make one up right now. Visa? MasterCard? AmEx? Platinum. I've got 'em all, at least in my dreams. But the man had asked for her by name. And then he had mentioned the work. He wasn't selling her anything. He, essentially, was offering her employment. *How did you get my phone number?* she had asked him. The information was readily available, he had replied, so authoritatively that she instantly believed him. But she already had a job, she had told him. He asked what her salary was. She refused to answer at first and then, opening her eyes while Lisa suckled contentedly, she told him. She wasn't sure why. Later, she would think that it was a premonition of things to come.