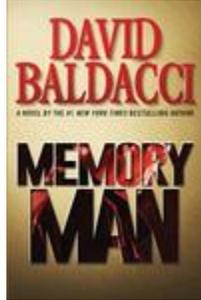


DAVID BALDACCI

A NOVEL BY THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEMORY MAN

With over 110 million copies of his novels in print, David Baldacci is one of the most widely read storytellers in the world. Now he introduces a startling, original new character: a man with perfect memory who must solve his own family's murder.



Look for *Memory Man*, available in April 2015.

A preview follows

CHAPTER 1

Amos Decker would forever remember all three of their violent deaths in the most paralyzing shade of blue. It would cut into him at unpredictable moments, like a gutting knife made of colored light. He would never be free from it.

The stakeout had been long and ultimately unproductive. Driving home, he had been looking forward to catching a few hours of sleep before hitting the streets once more. He'd pulled into the driveway of the modest two-story vinyl-sider that was twenty-five years old and would take at least that long to pay off. The rain had slicked the pavement, and as his size fourteen boots made contact, he slipped a bit before traction was gained. He closed the car door quietly, certain that all inside would be asleep at this late hour. He trudged to the screen door leading into the kitchen and let himself in.

The quiet was to be expected. But the *too* quiet nature of the setting was not. He had not sensed that then and later wondered why not. It was one of many failures on his part that night. He had paused in the kitchen to pour a glass of water from the tap. He chugged it, set the glass in the sink, wiped his chin dry, and headed to the next room.

He slipped on the floor and this time his big body tumbled. It was slick herringbone-patterned parquet and he had fallen before. Yet this time would be far different because of what he was about to observe. The moonlight had shafted in through the front window enough that he could see clearly.

When he held up his hand it was a different color.

Red. Blood.

It had come from somewhere. And he picked himself up to find out where.

He discovered the source in the next room. Johnny Sacks. His brother-in-law. A big, burly fellow like him, laid low. He bent closer, got on his knees, his face an inch or so from Johnny's. His throat had been slit from ear to ear. There was no need to check for a pulse; there could be none. Most of his blood was on the floor.

He should have pulled his phone and hit 911 at that very moment. He knew better. He knew not to stampede around a crime scene, for that was what his home had become by virtue of the dead man, killed by violent means. It was now a museum; you didn't touch anything. His professional side screamed this at him.

But this was only *one* body. His gaze jerked to the stairs and his mind suddenly disengaged as total panic seized every bit of him—the gut feeling that life had just robbed Decker of everything he would ever have. So he ran, his boots pushing coagulating pools of blood outward like an incoming tide.

He was destroying vital evidence, royally screwing up what should have been kept pristine. Right now he didn't give a damn.

He tracked Johnny's blood right up the stairs, taking the treads three at a time. His breaths were gasps and his heart was pumping so fast and feeling so bloated it was a wonder his chest wall could contain it. His mind seemed paralyzed, only his limbs were somehow still moving of their own accord.

He hit the hallway, bounced off one wall and then its twin as he rocketed down to the first door on the left. He never took out his gun, not even bothering to think that the killer could still be there. Waiting for him to come home.

He smashed open the door with his shoulder and looked wildly around. Nothing.

No, not true.

He froze in the doorway as the light on the nightstand dimly illuminated the bare foot that protruded above the mattress on the far side.

He knew that foot. He had held it, massaged it, and kissed it on occa-

sion over many years. It was long, narrow, but somehow still dainty, the toe next to the big one slightly longer than it should have been. The veins on the side, the calluses underneath, the nails painted red, it was all as it should be, except it should not be poking above the mattress at this time of night. That meant the rest of her was down on the floor and why would that be, unless...

He edged to that side of the bed and looked down.

Cassandra Decker, Cassie to all including and most importantly him, stared up at him from her position on the floor. Well, staring was beyond her now. He stumbled forward, stopped next to her, and then slowly knelt, his blue jean knees coming to rest in the patch of blood that had collected next to her.

Her blood.

Her neck was clean, no wound there. That was not the source of the blood. Her forehead was.

Single-entry gunshot. He knew he shouldn't, but he used his arm to scoop her head off the floor, cradled it next to his heaving chest. Her long dark hair splayed out over his arm like frozen spray from a hard breaker. The dot on her forehead was blackened and blistered from the heat of the bullet.

A contact wound preceded by a muzzle's kiss, lasting only a second before the projectile ended her life. Had she been asleep? Had she awoken? Would she have endured the terror of seeing her killer standing over her? He wondered all this as he held his wife for what would be the last time.

He put her back where he had found her. Decker stared down at the face that was white and lifeless, the blackened dot in the middle of her forehead to be his final memory of her, a grammatical period at the very *end*.

Of everything.

He rose, his legs feeling numb as he staggered out of the room and down the hall to the only other bedroom up here.

He did not force this door open. He was in no hurry now. He knew what he was going to find. He just didn't know what the killer's method would have been.

First, a knife. Second, a gun.

She wasn't in the bedroom, which left the adjoining bath.

The overhead light was on in there, burning brightly. The killer had obviously wanted him to see the last one clearly.

There she sat, on the toilet. Held there with the sash from her robe wrapped around the water tank, for otherwise she would have fallen over. He drew close.

His feet didn't slip. There was no blood. His little girl had no obvious wounds that he could see. But then he drew closer and saw the ligature marks on her neck, ugly and blotchy like someone had burned her there. Maybe the robe sash had been used. Maybe the guy's hands. Decker didn't know, didn't care. Death by strangulation was not painless. It was excruciating. And terrifying. And she would have been staring right up at him while he slowly compressed her life away.

Molly would have been ten in three days. A party had been planned, guests invited, the presents bought and the sheet cake with chocolate inside ordered. He had gotten time off to help Cassie, who worked full-time and also did pretty much everything here because his job was not a nine-to-fiver, not even close. They had joked about it. What did he know about real life? Grocery shopping? Paying the bills? Taking Molly to the doctor?

Nothing, as it turned out. Not a thing. Clueless.

He sat down on the floor in front of his dead child, crossing his long legs like his little girl liked to do, so the bottom of each foot was wedged against the inner thigh of the opposite leg. He was flexible for a big man. The lotus position, he dimly thought. Or something like that. He didn't even know why he was thinking this. He realized he must be in shock.

Her eyes were wide and open, staring back at him, but not seeing him. Like Mom. She would never see him again.

Decker just sat there, rocking back and forth, looking at her but not really seeing her, and his baby girl sure as heaven not seeing her daddy either.

This is it. Nothing left. I'm not staying by myself. Can't do it.

He slipped the compact nine-mil from his belt holster and made sure

a round was chambered by racking the slide. He cupped it in his hands. Nice little piece. It was accurate, with enough stopping power. He'd never shot anyone with it. But he'd wanted to.

He stared down at the muzzle with the iron sights. How many rounds fired at the police range? A thousand? Ten thousand? Well, he couldn't miss tonight.

He opened his mouth and swallowed the muzzle, angling it upward so the bullet would hit the brain and make the end quick. His finger came to rest on the trigger guard. He looked up at Molly. Suddenly embarrassed, he slipped the gun out and put it against his right temple and closed his eyes so he couldn't see her. Again, his index finger slipped to the trigger guard. Once past it, to the trigger, then the slow, steady pull until the point of no return. He'd never feel anything. His brain dead before it could tell the rest of his body that he'd jacked himself.

He just had to pull. *Just pull, Amos. You got nothing to lose because you got nothing left. They're gone. They're... gone.*

He held the gun there, wondering what he would say to his family once they were all reunited.

I'm sorry?

Forgive me?

I wish I'd been here to protect you from whoever did this? I should have been here to protect you?

He held the gun tighter, digging the metal against his temple so hard he felt the smooth barrel cut into his skin. A drop of blood appeared and then was wicked into his graying hair, which, he was fairly certain, had become even grayer over the last few minutes.

He wasn't seeking the courage to do it.

He was desperately searching for the right balance. Yet could there ever be balance in taking one's own life?

Still holding the gun in place, he slid out his phone, dialed 911, identified himself by name and badge number, and in two concise sentences described the slaughter of a trio of people. He dropped the phone on the floor.

Down below was Johnny.

Down the hall was Cassie.

Here, on the toilet, was Molly.

And suddenly, without warning, he was seeing all of this outlined in the most *terrifying* shade of blue. The bodies, the house, the whole night. This bubble of blue; it was everywhere. And he tilted his gaze to the ceiling and screamed out a curse, fueling it with all the rage and loss he was right now feeling. The damn colors, intruding even on this. Why could he not be normal, for just this one time, in his complete misery? He lowered his head and sat there on the floor with a gun to his head and absolutely nothing left in the rest of him. He was ready to die, ready to join them.

But for some reason unknown even to him, Decker didn't pull the trigger.

And so that was exactly how the cops found him when they showed up four minutes later.

CHAPTER 2

A park bench painted red.

The unsettling knifelike chill of fall draining to winter.

Amos Decker sat on the bench, waiting.

A sparrow zipped across in front of him, narrowly dodged a passing car before soaring upward, catching a breeze, and drifting away. He noted the make, model, plate number, and physical descriptions of all in the car before it left him. Husband and wife in the front, and a kid in the back in a booster seat. Another one next to him, older. About ten. The rear bumper had a sticker. It read, MY KID IS AN HONOR ROLL STUDENT AT THORNCREST ELEMENTARY.

Congrats, you've just told a psycho exactly where to snatch your very smart kid.

Then a bus rolled to a near stop. He ran his gaze over it, making the same observations. Fourteen passengers, most looking depressed and tired though it was still only midday. One was energetic, a child. He bebopped next to his exhausted mother, who sat slumped over, a fat bag perched in her lap. The driver was a newbie, her face a sheet of nervousness. Even with the power steering she fought the wheel and took the next turn so slow it looked like the bus's engine had died.

A plane soared overhead, low enough for him to ID it as a United 737, a later model because of the winglets. With the number 737, for him the color silver popped out. The number 737 was, in his mind, a beautiful concoction. Sleek, silver, fast, bulletlike. Anything beginning with a seven gave him that reaction. He appreciated that Boeing Corporation numbered all their aircraft beginning with seven.

Two young men walked past. Observed, recorded. One was older, bigger, the alpha, the other was the sidekick, only there for laughs and to push around. Then he noted the four kids playing in the park cross the street. Age, rank, serial number, pecking order, and hierarchy established before age six, like a pack of wolves. Done.

Next, a woman with a dog. A German shepherd. Not that old but with bad hips. Probably dysplasia, common in the breed. Cataloged. A man jabbering away on his smartphone. Zegna suit, the G for Gucci on the slick shoes, quarter-sized rock set in a gold band on his left hand, like a Super Bowl ring. Four-thousand-dollar Zenith watch on his right wrist. He was too small and the wrong build for a pro athlete. Dressed far too nicely for a typical drug dealer. Maybe a hedge fund manager, malpractice lawyer, or real estate developer. Memory socked away.

On the other side of the street an old woman in a wheelchair was being rolled out of a medical transport van. Her left side was useless, facial paralysis on the same side. Stroke. Documented. Her caregiver had mild scoliosis with a clubfoot. Imprinted.

Amos Decker noted all of this and more as his mind sorted through everything that was in front of him. Deducing here and there. Speculating sometimes. Guessing other times. None of it meant anything other than it was just what he did to pass the time while he was waiting. Just like counting in color. Just what he did to pass the time.

He had lost the house to foreclosure. They were barely making the payments with his and Cassie's salary. On his paycheck alone it was a no-go. He had tried to sell it, but who wanted to live in a house covered in blood?

He'd lived in an apartment for several months. Then a motel room. Then, when his job situation changed, he had relocated to a friend's couch. After the friend became less friendly he had opted for a homeless shelter. When funding ran out for the place and it was closed, he "down-sized" to a sleeping bag in the park. Then a cardboard box in a parking lot when the sleeping bag wore out and the cops roused the homeless from the park.

He had hit rock bottom. Bloated, dirty, wild-haired, bushy-bearded, he looked like he should be living in a cave somewhere attempting to con-

spire with aliens. And he pretty much was until he woke up in a Walmart parking lot one morning staring at a Georgia-Pacific logo on the inside of his corrugated box and had the churning epiphany that Cassie and Molly would have been deeply ashamed of what he had become.

So he had cleaned himself up, worked a bunch of odd jobs, saved some dollars, and moved into a room at the Residence Inn and hung out his PI shingle. He took whatever cases came his way; they were mostly lowball, low pay, but they were something. And he didn't need more than something.

It was a meaningless existence, really, just like he was, meaningless. His beard was still bushy, his hair still pretty wild, and he was still way overweight, but his clothes were reasonably clean and he showered, sometimes more than once a week. And he no longer lived in a box. Progress was always to be measured in inches, especially when you didn't have yards or even feet of success to show off.

He closed his eyes to block out his recent street observations, though it was all still there, like a cinema screen on the inside of his eyeballs. It would always still be there. He often wanted to forget what he had just seen. But everything in his head was recorded in permanent marker. He either dialed it up when needed or it popped up on its own accord. The former was helpful, the latter infinitely frustrating.

When the cops had come that night, they had talked him out of eating a round from his pistol. He had thought many times since of killing himself. So much so that he'd gone to therapy to work around that little issue. He'd even done group counseling and stood in front of a circle of like-minded suicidals.

I am Amos Decker. I want to kill myself. Period. End of story.

He opened his eyes.

Fifteen months, twenty-one days, twelve hours, fourteen minutes. Because of what he was, the clock was spinning in the forefront of his mind. That was the span of time that had passed since he had discovered the three bodies in his home, his family wiped out. And in sixty seconds it would be fifteen minutes plus the year, months, and days. And on and on it would go.

He looked down at himself. A four-year college football player and an a professional for an extraordinarily short stint, he had kept fit as a cop and later a detective. But he had not bothered with any of that after officially identifying the bodies of his wife, brother-in-law, and daughter. He was fifty pounds overweight, probably more. Probably a lot more. Six-five and a blimp with bum knees. His gut was soft and pushed out, his arms and chest flabby, his legs two meat sticks. He could no longer see even his overly long feet.

His hair was also long, peppered liberally with gray, and not very clean. It seemed perfectly suited to conceal a mind that by forgetting nothing managed to let him down all the time. His beard was startling both for its bulk and its for chaotic appearance, wisps and curls and stray strands meandering everywhere like vines searching for purchase on something. But he told himself it was good for his line of work. He had to go chase scum, and scum, by definition, did not often look mainstream. Indeed, they often ran from it.

He touched the threadbare patch on his jeans and then looked down at the knees where the bloodstains were still visible.

Her blood. Cassie's blood. Morbid to still have it there.

Burn the pants, Amos. Most normal people would have done that.

But I'm not normal. I haven't been normal since I stepped on that field and took that hit.

The hit was the only thing he had never remembered. Ironic, since it was the catalyst for his never forgetting anything else. But it had been played relentlessly on the sports shows at the time. And even the national news felt the need to document the violence done to him to their country-wide audience. Someone told him the snippet had even been uploaded to YouTube a few years ago and had over eight million views. And yet he had never seen it. He didn't have to. He'd been there. He'd *felt* it. That was enough.

And all he had done to deserve the folderol of attention was to die on a football field, not once, but twice.

He ran a furtive, mostly embarrassed glance down at his jeans. His gut hung over the waistband because he'd been thinner back then. He had

washed them, but the bloodstains had not come out. Why should they be different from his brain? The pants could have, should have been evidence. Let the cops take them, but they hadn't, and he hadn't offered. He kept them, wore them still. Stupid way of remembering. Asinine, really. Horribly macabre way of keeping Cassie with him. Like toting her ashes in a Scooby-Doo lunchbox. But then again, he wasn't really okay. Even though he had a place to live, held a job, and was functioning, for the most part. He really wasn't okay. He would never be okay in any way.

He technically had been a suspect in the case, because husbands always were. But not for long. The timing of the deaths cleared him. He had an alibi. He didn't care about alibis. He knew he hadn't touched one hair on their heads, and didn't give a damn if no one else thought the same.

The real issue was that no one had ever been arrested for the murders. There hadn't even been any suspects, not a lead to come by. Nothing.

The working-class neighborhood they had lived in was quiet and the folks friendly, always offering a helping hand to others because nobody had much and everybody needed some help from time to time. Fixing a car or a furnace, or hammering a nail into a board, or cooking a meal because a mom was sick, or shepherding kids in a communal transportation system based on trust and need.

There were some tough nuts who lived there, for sure, but he hadn't spotted a homicidal one in the bunch. Mostly bikers and potheads. He had looked. He had done nothing else except investigate the crimes, even though officially they had told him to stay away from it all. But no clues presented themselves, even with his obsessively running everything down.

There were opportunities and obstacles for a crime such as this. Doors were left unlocked; folks came and went. So access was clearly there. But the houses were close together, so something should have been heard. But no sounds were ever heard from 4305 Boston Avenue that night. How could three people have died so quietly? Didn't violent death provoke outrage? Screams? A struggle? Something? Apparently not. The gunshot? Like a ghost whispering. Or else the whole neighborhood had gone deaf that night. And blind. And mute.

And months later there was still nothing, long after the trail had grown cold and the odds of solving the case and catching the killer had dropped to near zero. He had left the police force then because he could no longer push paper and run down other cases and bother with precinct drama. The upper management said they were sorry to see him go, but no one asked him to stay either. The truth was, he was becoming disruptive, unmanageable. And he was all of those things. Because he no longer cared about anything.

Well, except for one thing.

He had visited their graves all the time. They were buried in plots he had hastily purchased, because who would buy a plot for a man and a woman in their early forties and a grave for a ten-year-old? But then he had stopped going because he could not face them lying there in the dirt. He had not avenged them. He had done nothing except identify their bodies. A pitiful penance. God would hardly be impressed.

Their deaths had to be connected with what he did. He had put lots of people away over the years. Some were out now. Others had friends. Just before the murders at 4305 Boston Avenue, he had helped break up a local meth ring that was doing its best to make everybody in the metro area an addict and thus a good customer, young, old, and every demographic in between. These dudes were bad, evil, kill you to look at you. They could've found out where he lived. Easy enough. He wasn't undercover. And they might've taken out their revenge on his wife and child, and her brother who had picked the wrong time to visit from out of town. But there was not a scrap of evidence against this group. And without that, no arrests. No trial. No judgment. No execution.

His fault. His guilt. Maybe led them right to his family, and now he had no family.

The community had held a fund-raiser for him. Collected a few thousand bucks. It was all sitting in a bank account untouched. Taking the money would have seemed to him to be an act of betrayal for those he had lost, so the money sat, though he certainly could have used it. He was getting by, barely. But barely was all he needed. Because *barely* was all he was now.

He settled back against the wood of the bench and shrugged his coat closer around him. He was not here by accident.

He was here on a job.

And as he looked to his left, he saw that it was time to get to work.

He rose and headed after the two people he'd been waiting for.

CHAPTER 3

The bar was much like every other bar Decker had ever been in.

Dark, cool, musty, smoky, where light fell funny and everyone looked like someone you knew or wanted to know. Or, more likely, wanted to forget. Where everyone was your friend until he was your enemy and cracked a pool stick over your skull. Where things were quiet until they weren't. Where you could drink away anything that life threw at you. Where a thousand Billy Joel wannabes would serenade you into the wee hours.

Only I could drink a thousand drinks and never forget a damn thing. I would just remember every detail of the thousand drinks down to the shapes of the ice cubes.

Decker took a seat at the bar where he could see himself in the reflection of the big mirror behind the stacked rows of Beam and Beef, Glen and Sapphire.

He ordered a dollar draft, clutched the mug between his hammy hands, and studied the mirror. Back corner and to the right. They had sat down there, the couple he'd followed into the place.

The gent was late fortyish, the girl half that. The man was dressed in the best he had. A pinstripe wool three-piece, yellow tie dotted with blue flecks in the shape of what looked to be sperms on their way to fertilize an egg, and a dandy pocket handkerchief to match. Hair swept back revealed a lined, mature brow—attractive on a man, less so on a woman, but then life had always been unfair that way. Impressive diamond rings on the manicured fingers. Probably stolen. Or fakes. Like he was. His toenails were probably clipped too. His shoes were polished, but he'd missed the

backs. They were scuffed, which came much closer to the man's actual nature. He was scuffed too. And he only wanted to impress on the way in, not on the way out. After the way out, you'd never see the prick again.

She was doe-eyed and dough-brained. Pretty in a vacuous, seen-it-a-thousand-times sort of way. Like watching a 3-D movie without the requisite glasses; something was just off. The lady was so blindly faithful and oblivious that part of you just wanted to walk away and leave her to her fate.

But Decker was being paid *not* to do that. In fact, he was being paid to do the opposite.

She was dressed in a skirt and jacket and blouse that probably cost more than Decker's car. Or the car he'd once had. The bank had gotten that too, as banks often did.

She came from old money. She was so used to the privileged life that was attached to such status that it made her incapable of understanding why someone would work so hard to snatch from her things she simply took for granted. That made her a potential victim every minute of every day of her life.

Such was the current moment: the shark and the dummy. Decker saw him as a six, a dirty number in his mind. She was a four, innocuous and uninteresting.

They touched hands and then lips. They shared drinks—he a whiskey sour, she a pink martini.

Figured.

Decker nursed his beer and bided his time. He looked at them without seeming too. In addition to the number tag, to him she was outlined in orange, the guy in purple, the same color he associated with zero, an unwelcome digit. So the guy really represented two numbers to him—six and zero. It seemed complicated, he knew, but he had no difficulty keeping it straight because it was just there in his head clear as an image in a mirror.

And it wasn't that he saw them exactly in those colors. It was the *perception* of those colors. That was the best and only way he could explain the sensation. It wasn't like they taught a class on this. And he had come

to it relatively late in the game. He was just doing the best he could. He thought he'd left the world of Crayola back in kindergarten.

They continued with their lovey-dovey, hand-holding, foot-rubbing, heavy-petting afternoon fun and games. She obviously wanted more. He was unwilling to give it, because you teased a mark. Rushing could only mean bad things. And this guy was good. Not the best Decker had seen, but serviceable. He probably made a decent living.

For a purple zero.

Decker knew the guy was waiting to make an ask. A loan for a business prospect that couldn't miss. Some tragedy in his extended family that needed financial remedy. He wouldn't want to do it. Hated himself for it. But this was his last resort. She was his last chance. And he didn't expect her to understand. Or say yes. The debate framed that way, what other answer could she give? Except, "Yes, my darling. Take double. Triple even. Daddy will never miss it. It's only money, after all. *His* money."

An hour and two more pink martinis later, she left him there. Her parting kiss was tender and moving, and he reacted in just the right way, until she turned away and his expression changed. From one of reciprocal tenderness and love to one of triumph and some might even say cruelty. At least that's what Decker would say.

Decker did not like interacting with people. He preferred his own company. He hated idle conversation because he no longer understood its point. But this was part of what he did. This was how he paid the bills. So he told himself to get over it. At least for now.

Because it was time to punch the clock.

He carried his beer over to the table in time to put a massive hand on the man's shoulder and push him back into the seat he was just about to vacate.

Decker sat across from him, eyed the man's untouched whiskey sour—predators didn't drink on the job—and then raised his own beer in praise.

"Nice work. I like to see a real pro on the job."

The man said nothing at first. He eyed Decker, sizing up his unkempt appearance and looking unfavorably impressed.

"Do I know you?" he said at last, his tone snarky. "Because I don't see

how that's possible."

Decker sighed. He had expected something a bit original. It was apparently not to be. "No, and you don't have to know me. All you have to do is look at these."

He pulled the manila envelope from his coat pocket and passed it across.

The man hesitated but then picked it up.

Decker took a drink of his beer and said, "Open it."

"Why should I?"

"Fine, then don't open it. No sweat off here."

He went to take the envelope, but the man jerked it out of reach. He undid the binding and slid out the half dozen photos.

"First rule of a con, Slick," said Decker. "Don't play on the sidelines while you're on a job. And when I said you were a pro I was being charitable."

His hand reached out and he tapped the photo on top. "She doesn't have enough clothes on and neither do you. And by the way, that particular act is illegal in pretty much all states south of the Mason-Dixon."

The man glanced up, his look one of caution. "How did you get these?"

Again, Decker felt disappointed by the query. "So now it's just a matter of negotiation. I'm authorized to give you fifty thousand bucks. In return, you write this one off and move on to someone else. In another state."

The man smiled, slid the photos back, and said, "If you thought these were a real problem for me, why not just show them to her? Why come here and offer me a way out with cash?"

Decker sighed once more and for the third time felt disappointed. This guy was just not a challenge. He collected the photos and put them back neatly in the envelope.

"You read my mind, Slick. Exactly what I told her old man. Thanks for validating my opinion. The girl's very religious, by the way. What you're doing to the lady in that third picture is a deal killer, in addition to the fact that she's your *wife*. Have a good one."

He rose to leave, but the man clutched at his arm. "I can hurt you," he said.

Decker took the man's fingers and bent them back until he gasped, and then and only then did Decker let go.

He said, "I'm fat, but I'm two of you and a whole lot meaner. I don't have to have a pretty face to do what I do. But you do. So if I take you out back and smash it in, what does that do for your future cash flow? You see my point?"

The man held his injured hand and paled. "I'll take the money."

"Great. I have the check for twenty-five grand right here."

"You said it was fifty thousand!"

"That was only if you pulled the trigger when I asked. You didn't. The consequences are your return goes down by half."

"You son of a bitch."

Decker sat back down and slipped a piece of paper from his pocket. "Plane ticket. One-way. For as far away from here as you can get without leaving the lower forty-eight. Leaves in three hours. A condition of the check clearing is you being on it. They'll have people there to confirm, so don't do anything stupid."

"Where's the check?" demanded the man.

Decker pulled out another piece of paper. "You need to sign this first."

He handed the paper across. The man ran his gaze down it. "But this—"

"This ensures the lady will never think of you again, except in a very bad way. Which means even if you try to slink back here it'll be a no-go."

The man's brain ran through what was happening, what this all really meant. "So you're blackmailing me with the photos and the fact that I'm married to get me to sign this? And if I don't sign you'll show her the photos and tell her I'm married and trust that will be enough to get me off her?"

"What a genius you are."

The man sneered. "I have a dozen more just like her. And far better-looking. She wanted me to sleep with her. I kept putting it off. You saw the photos. I have filet mignon at home. Why would I settle for hamburger, even if it does come with a trust fund? She's a dumb shit. And she's only fair-looking on a good day, even with all of *Daddy's* money."

“Mr. Marks saw you coming from a mile away, even if his little girl didn’t. But then again, Jenny’s been taken in before by scum like you. She deserves better.”

Decker didn’t know Jenny Marks and could not have cared less about her romantic entanglements. He had made these comments because he needed Slick to keep going. Keep talking. Get it all off his chest.

“She deserves better? Shit, I don’t know why I even bothered. I could get better ass than Jenny Marks without even trying. And I wouldn’t have to listen to her baby talk.”

“Dumb shit? Baby talk? Really? Lady has a college degree.” Decker already had more than he needed, but he was starting to enjoy this.

“Actually, she’s not a dumb shit. She’s a freaking moron.”

Okay, fun is over.

Decker took the unsigned piece of paper and slid it into the envelope with the photos. He put them all away in his coat pocket.

“What the hell are you doing?” the man said incredulously.

In answer Decker pulled out a miniature digital recorder and hit play.

“I’m sure she’ll enjoy your description of her,” said Decker. “What kind of hamburger by the way? All beef? Organic? Or just freaking moronic?”

The man sat there looking stunned.

Decker put the recorder away and pushed the one-way ticket toward the guy. “We’ll let you keep this. Be sure your butt is on the plane. The next guy they send out will be even bigger than me, and it won’t just be your fingers he cracks. It’ll be you.”

The man said pitifully, “Are you telling me I get none of the money?”

Decker stood. “Like I said, what a genius you are.”

CHAPTER 4

Decker sat on his bed in his one room about the size of a prison cell. For dealing with clients he used a table in the dining room of the Residence Inn, where his monthly payment included a daily buffet breakfast. They were definitely losing money on him with that arrangement. He would just pick up entire plates of food from the buffet and carry them to his table. He could have used a backhoe instead of a fork.

He had gotten his check from Mr. Marks's emissary. A buddy on the police force had recommended Decker to the rich guy to handle this delicate matter concerning his vapid daughter who was always falling in love with the wrong guy. He'd never met with the old man, only his reps. That was okay; he doubted Marks would have wanted him soiling his fancy furniture. They had met at the breakfast bar—two young slicks in thousand-dollar suits who declined to even sample the coffee. They were probably more into double espressos spit out from those shiny little machines manned by a barista. He could tell from their expressions that they knew exactly how good they had it and how not good Decker had it. He'd worn his best shirt to the meeting, meaning the other one.

Daddy Marks had authorized up to a hundred grand to get rid of the albatross around his little girl's neck. After sizing up the con, Decker had told the slicks he could get it done for a lot less. And he had. For the price of a one-way ticket, in fact. Chump change. You'd think Daddy Warbucks would have bonused him at least a percentage of the six-figure savings. But he stuck to the letter of their agreement and Decker just got his flat hourly rate, though he'd padded that considerably and made a nice payday for himself. Yet a percentage would have been good. Probably how

the rich stayed rich. But it had been worth it, to see a con conned. And he figured Jenny Marks would be in the same boat in a few more months and he'd get called up again. Maybe he should ask Daddy Warbucks for a retainer.

He left his room and made his way to the dining area right off the inn's lobby. It was early and he was the only one there other than eighty-year-old June, who was enjoying her golden years by shoveling greasy home fries onto a platter at the buffet stand.

After loading up his plate he sat down to eat at his usual table.

His first forkful was halfway to his mouth when he saw her come in.

She would be forty-two now, same age as he was. She looked older. Her job just did that to a person. It had done so to him.

He lowered his gaze and his fork and salted everything on his plate four times over, including the pancakes. He was hoping that a man of his considerable size could shrink to invisibility behind a wall of protein and carbs.

"Hello, Amos."

Well, apparently not.

He shoved a forkful of congealed eggs, grits, bacon, home fries, and ketchup down his throat. He chewed with his mouth open, hoping that the sight would prompt her to hit a U-turn and go back to where she came from.

No such luck.

She sat down across from him. The table was small and she was small as well. But he was not. He was huge. He took up most of the table just by being there.

"How're you doing?" she asked.

He stuffed more food into his mouth and smacked his lips together. He didn't look up. What would have been the point? There was nothing that she could possibly say that he would want to hear.

She said, "I can wait this out, if that's how you want to play it. I've got all the time in the world."

He finally looked at her. She was stick-thin because of the cigarettes and the gum, which she always substituted for food and drink. He was

probably having more food at this one meal than she put away in a month.

Her hair was a pasty blonde, her skin wrinkled and splotchy. Her nose was crooked—some said from an encounter with a mean drunk when she was a beat cop. Her small, pointy chin seemed overwhelmed by her disproportionately large mouth where uneven and nicotine-stained teeth lurked like bats hanging in a cave.

She was not pretty. Her looks were not what made her memorable. What made her remarkable was that she had been the first female detective on the Burlington Police Department. As far as he knew she was still the only one. And she had been his partner. They had made more arrests leading to more convictions than anyone in the history of the department. Some on the force thought that was just great. Others thought they were full of themselves. Starsky and Hutch, one rival had called them. Decker never knew which one he was supposed to be, the blond or the brunet.

“Hello, Mary Suzanne Lancaster,” he said, because he somehow couldn’t *not* say it.

She smiled, reached over, and poked his shoulder. He winced slightly and drew back a bit, but she didn’t seem to notice. “I didn’t know you even knew my middle name.”

He looked down at his food, his limited chitchat quota exhausted.

She ran her gaze over him, and when she was done Lancaster seemed to silently acknowledge that all reports of Decker having hit rock bottom were spot on.

“I won’t ask how you’ve been, Amos. I can see not too good.”

“I live here instead of in a box,” he said bluntly.

Startled she said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“You need something?” he asked. “I have a schedule.”

She nodded. “I’m sure. Well, I came by to talk to you.”

“Who did *you* talk to?”

“You mean how did I know you were here?”

His look told her that was obviously his question.

“Friend of a friend.”

“Didn’t think you had that many friends,” said Decker. It wasn’t a funny line, really, and he certainly didn’t smile. But she forced a chuckle

as a potential icebreaker, but then caught herself, realizing, probably, that it was stupid to do so.

“Well, I’m also a detective. I *can* find out things. And Burlington isn’t *that* big. It’s not New York. Or L.A.”

He smacked his lips, shoveled in some more food, and his mind started to wander back to colored numbers and things that could tell time in his head.

She seemed to sense his withdrawal. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened to you. You lost a lot, Amos. You didn’t deserve this, not that anyone does.”

He glanced at her with not a single emotion evident in the look. Sympathy was not going to hold his attention. He had never sought sympathy, mainly because his mind didn’t really get that particular sensation. At least not anymore. He could be caring. He *had* been caring and loving with his family. But sympathy and its even more irritating cousin, empathy, were no longer in his wheelhouse.

Perhaps sensing that she was losing him again, she quickly said, “I also came to tell you something.”

He ran his gaze up and down her. He couldn’t help himself, so he said, “You’ve lost weight. About five pounds you couldn’t afford to lose. And you might have a vitamin D deficiency.”

“How do you figure?”

“You were walking stiffly when you came in. Bone ache is a classic symptom.” He pointed to her forehead. “And it’s cold outside but your head is sweating. Another classic. And you’ve crossed and uncrossed your legs five times in the brief time you’ve been sitting there. Bladder problems. Another symptom.”

She frowned at this very personal appraisal. “What, did you start medical school or something?” she said crossly.

“I read an article four years ago while I was waiting at the dentist’s office.”

She touched her forehead. “I guess I don’t get out much in the sun.”

“And you smoke like a rocket, which doesn’t help anything. Try a supplement. Vit D deficiencies lead to bad stuff. And quit the cigarettes. Try

a patch.” He glanced down and saw what he had seen when she first sat down. He said, “You also have a tremor in your left hand.”

She held it with her right, unconsciously rubbing at the spot. “I think it’s just a nerve thing.”

“But you shoot left-handed. So you might want to check it out.”

She glanced down at the slight bulge on the right side of her jacket at the waistband where her pistol rode in a belt holster.

She smiled. “You have any more Sherlock Holmes stuff to throw at me? Want to check out my knees? Look at my fingertips? Tell me what I had for breakfast?”

He took a prolonged sip of coffee. “Just have it checked out. Could be something else. More than a tremor. Bad stuff starts in the hands and the eyes. It’s an early warning, like a canary in a coal mine. And departmental firearms recert comes up next month. Doubt you’ll pass with your grip hand going whacky on you.”

Her smile faded. “I hadn’t thought about that. I will, thanks, Amos.”

He looked down at his food and drew a deep breath. He was done, just waiting for her to leave. He closed his eyes. He might just go to sleep right here.

She idly played with the button of her jacket, shooting glances at him. Preparing for what she had really come here to do. To say.

“We made an arrest, Amos. In *your* case.”

Amos Decker opened his eyes. And kept them open.

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David Baldacci is a global #1 bestselling author. His books are published in over 45 languages and in more than 80 countries, and have been adapted for both feature film and television. David Baldacci is also the cofounder, along with his wife, of the Wish You Well Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting literacy efforts across America. Still a resident of his native Virginia, he invites you to visit him at DavidBaldacci.com and his foundation at WishYouWellFoundation.org.