

CHAPTER

1

On a refreshingly brisk, beautifully clear fall evening, Amos Decker was surrounded by dead bodies. Yet he wasn't experiencing the electric blue light sensation that he usually did when confronted by the departed.

There was a perfectly good reason for this: None of these were *recent* deaths.

He was back in his hometown of Burlington, Ohio, an old factory city that had seen better days. He had recently been in another Rust Belt town, Baronville, Pennsylvania, where he had narrowly escaped death. If he had his druthers, he would have avoided such minefields for the foreseeable future, maybe the rest of his life.

Only right now he didn't have a choice.

Decker was in Burlington because today was his daughter Molly's fourteenth birthday. Under normal circumstances, this would have been a happy occasion, a cause for joy. But Molly had been murdered, along with his wife, Cassie, and his brother-in-law, Johnny Sacks. This devastating event had happened shortly before her tenth birthday, when Decker found them all dead in their home.

Gone forever. Taken from life in the most outrageous manner possible by a deranged mind hell-bent on violence. Their killer was no longer among the living, but that was of absolutely no solace to Decker, though he'd been instrumental in ending that life.

That was why his birthday visit was at a cemetery. No cake, and no presents. Just fresh flowers on a grave to replace ones long dead from a previous visit.

He figured he would be here for every one of Molly's birthdays until he joined his family six feet under. That was his long-term plan. He had never contemplated any other.

He shifted his weight on the wood and wrought-iron bench next to the twin graves, for daughter lay next to mother. The bench had been gifted by the Burlington Police Department where Decker had once toiled, first as a beat cop and later as a homicide detective. On it, tarnished by weather, was a brass plaque that read: *In memory of Cassie and Molly Decker.*

There was no one else in the small cemetery other than Decker's partner at the FBI, Alex Jamison. More than a dozen years younger than the mid-fortyish Decker, Jamison stood a respectful distance away, allowing her partner to visit his family in solitude.

Once a journalist, Jamison was now a fully fledged, duly sworn-in FBI special agent, having graduated from the Bureau's Training Academy in Quantico, Virginia. Under a prior arrangement, she had been sent immediately back to the task force where she and Decker were members, along with two other veteran agents, Ross Bogart and Todd Milligan.

Sitting next to the graves, Decker cursed his condition of hyperthymesia. The perfect recall had been initiated by a wicked blindside hit on an NFL playing field that triggered a traumatic brain injury. Decker awoke from a coma with the ability to remember everything and the inability to forget anything. It seemed like a wonderful attribute, but there was a distinct downside to the condition.

For him, the passage of time would never deaden the details of painful memories. Like the one he was confronted with presently. For the overwhelmingly intense manner in which he recalled their deaths, Cassie and Molly might as well have been laid to rest today instead of four years ago.

He read the names and inscriptions on the tombstones, though he knew by heart what they said. He had come here with many things he wanted to say to his family, but now he inexplicably suffered from a complete failure to articulate any of them.

Well, maybe not so inexplicably. The brain injury that had given

him perfect recall had also changed his personality. His social skills had gone from high to quite low. He had trouble voicing his emotions and difficulty dealing with people.

In his mind's eye he conjured first the image of his daughter. It was sharply in focus — the curly hair, the smile, the cheeks that rode so high. Then the image of his wife, Cassie, appeared — the anchor of their family, the one who had kept Decker from succumbing to his condition, forcing him to interact with others, compelling him to come as close as possible to the man he used to be.

He winced in pain because it actually physically hurt to be so close to them, because they were dead and he was not. There were many days, perhaps most, when he simply could not accept that state of affairs.

He glanced in the direction of Jamison, who was leaning against a broad oak about a hundred feet away. She was a good friend, an excellent colleague, but absolutely powerless to help him through what he was facing now.

He turned back to the graves, knelt, and placed the bundles of flowers he had brought on each of the sunken plots.

“Amos Decker?”

Decker looked up to see an older man walking slowly toward him. He had materialized out of the dusk of elongating shadows. As he drew closer, the man almost seemed a ghost himself, so very painfully thin, his features deeply jaundiced.

Jamison had seen the man coming before Decker did, and had started striding toward them. It could simply be someone from the town whom Decker knew. Or it might be something else. Jamison knew that crazy things tended to happen around Amos Decker. Her hand went to the butt of the pistol riding in a holster on her right hip. Just incase.

Decker eyed the man. Aside from his unhealthy appearance, the fellow was shuffling along in a way that Decker had seen before. It wasn't solely due to age or infirmity. It was the walk of someone accustomed to wearing shackles when moving from point A to point B.

He's a former prisoner, speculated Decker.

And there was another thing. As he sometimes did, Decker was seeing a color associated with the man. This was due to his also having synesthesia, which caused him to pair colors with unusual things, like death and numbers.

The color tag for this gent was burgundy. That was a new one for Decker.

What the hell does burgundy mean?

"Who are you?" he asked, rising to his feet and brushing the dirt from his knees.

"Not surprised you don't recognize me. Prison takes it outta you. Guess I have you to thank for that."

So he was incarcerated.

Jamison also heard this and picked up her pace. She actually half drew her pistol, afraid that the old man was there to exact some sort of revenge on Decker. Her partner had put many people behind bars in his career. And this fellow was apparently one of them.

Decker looked the man up and down as he came to a stop about five feet away. Decker was a mountain of a man, standing six-five and tipping the scale at just about three hundred pounds. With Jamison's encouragement and help in getting him to exercise and eat a healthier diet, he had lost over a hundred pounds in the last two years. This was about as "lean" as he was ever going to be.

The old man was about six feet tall, but Decker figured he barely weighed a hundred and forty pounds. His torso was about as wide as one of Decker's thighs. Up close, his skin looked brittle, like aged parchment about to disintegrate.

Hacking up some phlegm, the man turned to the side and spit it into the consecrated ground. "You sure you don't recognize me? Don't you got some kind of weird-ass memory thing?"

Decker said, "Who told you that?"

"Your old partner."

"Mary Lancaster?"

The man nodded. "She was the one who told me you might be here."

"Why would she do that?"

"My name's Meryl Hawkins," said the man, in a way that seemed also to carry an explanation as to why he was here.

Decker's jaw fell slightly.

Hawkins smiled at this reaction, but it didn't reach his eyes. They were pale and still, with perhaps just a bit of life left inside them.

"Now you remember me, right?"

"Why are you out of prison? You got life, no parole."

Jamison reached them and put herself between Decker and Hawkins.

Hawkins nodded at her. "You're his new partner, Alex Jamison. Lancaster told me about you too." He glanced back at Decker. "To answer your question, I'm no longer in prison 'cause I'm terminal with cancer. One of the worst. Pancreatic. Survival rate past five years is for shit, they tell me, and that's with chemo and radiation and all that crap, none of which I can afford." He touched his face. "Jaundice. You get this, it's way too late to kick it. And it's metastasized. Big word, means the cancer's eating me up everywhere. Brain too now. It's the last inning for me. No doubt about it, I'm done. Hell, maybe a week at best."

"Why is that a reason to release you?" asked Jamison.

Hawkins shrugged. "They call it *compassionate release*. Inmate usually has to file for it, but they came to my cell with the paperwork. I filled it out, they got doctors to okay it, and there you go. See, the state didn't want to foot the bill for my treatments. I was in one of those private prisons. They mark the bill up to the state, but it doesn't all get reimbursed. Gets expensive. Hurts their bottom line. They figure I'm harmless now. I went into prison when I was fifty-eight. Now I'm seventy. Look like I'm a hundred, I know. I'm all jacked up with drugs just to walk and talk. After I leave here, I'm going to be throwing up for a few hours and then take enough pills to sleep a bit."

Jamison said, "If you're on prescription painkillers, somebody's helping you."

"Didn't say they were *prescription*, did I? As a matter of fact, they're not. But it's what I need. Not like they're putting me back

in prison because I'm buying street drugs. I cost too much." He chuckled. "If I'd known that, I woulda got sick years ago."

"Do you mean they don't provide any help for you on the outside?" asked Jamison incredulously.

"They said a hospice place would take me, but I got no way to get there. And I don't want to go there. I want to be here." Hawkins stared at Decker.

"What do you want from me?" asked Decker.

Hawkins pointed his finger at him. "You put me in prison. But you were wrong. I'm innocent."

"Don't they all say that?" noted Jamison skeptically.

Hawkins shrugged again. "I don't know about anybody else but me." He glanced back at Decker. "Lancaster thinks I'm innocent."

"I don't believe that," said Decker.

"Ask her. It's why she told me where you were." He paused and looked at the dark sky. "You got another chance to get it right. Maybe you can do it while I'm still alive and kicking. If not, that's okay, so long as you get there. It'll be my legacy," he added with a weak grin.

"He's with the FBI now," interjected Jamison. "Burlington and your case are no longer his jurisdiction."

Hawkins looked nonplussed. "Heard you cared about the truth, Decker. Did I hear wrong? Come a long way for nothing if that's so."

When Decker didn't answer, Hawkins pulled out a slip of paper. "I'll be in town the next couple of nights. Here's the address. Maybe I'll see you, maybe I won't. But if you don't come, well, fuck you from the hereafter."

Decker took the paper but still said nothing.

Hawkins glanced at the twin graves. "Lancaster told me about your family. Glad you found out who killed 'em. But I suppose you still felt guilt, though you were innocent. I can damn well relate."

Hawkins turned and walked slowly back between the graves until the darkness swallowed him whole.

Jamison turned to Decker. "Okay, I know nothing about this, but it's still nuts. He's just taunting you, making you feel guilty. And I can't believe the guy would come here and butt in while you're trying to . . . trying to spend time with your family."

Decker looked down at the slip of paper. It was clear from his features that something akin to doubt had just now crept into his mind.

Jamison watched him, resignation spreading over her features. "You're going to see him, aren't you?"

"Not until I see someone else first."

CHAPTER

2

Decker stood alone on the porch. He had asked Jamison to not accompany him here. He preferred to conduct this visit alone, for a number of reasons.

He remembered every inch of the more than four-decades-old split-level ranch. This was not simply due to his perfect recall, but also because this house was nearly an exact copy of the one in which he and his family had once lived.

Mary Lancaster and her husband, Earl, and their daughter, Sandy, had resided here for as long as Lancaster had been on the Burlington police force, which matched Decker's tenure there as well. Earl was a general contractor who worked sporadically owing to the fact that Sandy was a special needs child who would always require a great deal of time and attention. Mary had been the family's primary breadwinner for a long time.

Decker stepped up to the door. He was about to knock when it opened.

Mary stood there dressed in faded jeans, a blood-red sweat-shirt, and dark blue sneakers. Her hair had once been a pasty blonde. It was now full of gray and hung limply to her shoulders. A cigarette was perched in one hand, its coil of smoke drifting up her slender thigh. Her face was as lined as a thumbprint. Lancaster was the same age as Decker yet looked about ten years older.

"Thought I might see you tonight," she said in a smoker's gravelly voice. "Come on in."

He checked for the tremor that used to be in her left hand, her gun grip hand. He didn't see it.

Okay, that's a good thing.

She turned, and he followed the far shorter woman into the house, shutting the door behind him, a tugboat guiding a cargo ship safely into port. Or maybe onto the rocks, he didn't know which. Yet.

Decker also noted that Lancaster, always thin to begin with, was even more gaunt. Her bones seemed to jut out at odd angles within her loose clothing, as though she had left multiple hangers in them.

"Did the gum stop working?" he asked, glancing at her lit cigarette.

They sat in the living room, a small space littered with toys, stacks of newspapers, open cardboard boxes, and a layer of chaos that was palpable. Her home had always been like this, he knew. They'd started using a maid service before Decker left town, but that had come with its own set of problems. They'd probably decided terminally junky was preferable.

She took a drag on her Camel and let the smoke trail out her nostrils.

"I allow myself one a day, about this time, and only when Earl and Sandy are out. Then I Febreze the hell out of the place."

Decker took a whiff and coughed. "Then use more Febreze."

"Meryl Hawkins found you, I take it?"

Decker nodded. "He said you told him where I was."

"I did."

"That was taking a liberty. You knew why I was in town. I gave you aheads-up."

She sat back and scraped away at a spot on her skin with her fingernail. "Well, I sure as hell didn't do it lightly. But I thought you'd want to know."

"Hawkins also said you believed him."

"Then he went too far. I told him I could see his point."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"Why would he come back here, dying, to ask us to clear his name if he's not innocent?"

"I can think of one reason, benefiting him."

She took another puff and shook her head. "I don't see it that way. You get to the end of the line, you start to think differently. Not a moment to waste."

Decker looked at the open cardboard boxes. "You guys moving?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? How can you not be sure?"

Lancaster shrugged. "What about life is guaranteed?"

"How're things in Burlington?"

"Town's hanging in there."

"Unemployment's down around the country."

"Yeah, we have lots of ten-dollar-an-hour jobs. If you can live on twenty grand a year, even in Burlington, more power to you."

"Where are Earl and Sandy?"

"School function. Earl handles those more than me. Work's been a bitch lately. Bad times make for bad crimes. Lots of drug-related stuff."

"Yeah, I've seen that. Why did Hawkins come to see you?"

"We worked that case together, Decker. It was our first homicide investigation."

"When did he get out? And is he really terminal? He definitely looks it."

"He wandered into the station two days ago. Shocked the hell out of me. At first I thought he'd escaped or something. I didn't accept his story but straight away checked with the prison. He's telling the truth about his cancer. And his release."

"So they can just kick out terminally ill prisoners to die on their own?"

"Apparently some see it as a good cost-cutting tactic."

"He told me he's staying in town a couple more days. He's at the Residence Inn."

"Where you used to live."

"He could use some fattening up with the buffet, but I doubt

he has much appetite. He says he gets by on street drugs, basically."

"Sad state of affairs."

"He wants to meet with me again."

She took another puff. "I'm sure."

"He came to see me at the *cemetery*."

Lancaster took one more luxurious drag on her smoke and then crushed it out in an ashtray set on a table next to her chair. She eyed the remnants with longing.

"I'm sorry about that. I didn't tell him exactly *why* you were in town when he came back to the station earlier today and asked, though I did tell him about your family. And I didn't actually tell him to go to the cemetery." She studied Decker, her pale eyes finally focusing on his. "I presume you've gone over the case in immaculate detail in your head?"

"I have. And I don't see any issues with what we did. We went over the crime scene, collected evidence. That evidence pointed like a laser to Hawkins. He was arrested and put on trial. We testified. Hawkins's lawyer put on a defense and cross-examined the crap out of us both. And the jury convicted him. He got life without parole when he could have gotten the death penalty. It all made sense to me."

Lancaster sat back in her chair.

Decker ran his gaze over her. "You don't look so good, Mary."

"I haven't looked good for at least ten years, Amos. You above all should know that."

"But still."

"You've lost a lot of weight since you left here, Amos."

"Jamison's doing, mostly. She's got me working out and watching my diet. She cooks a lot of the meals. All salads and vegetables, and *tofu*. And she got her FBI badge and creds. Worked hard for them. Really proud of her."

"So you two are living together, then?" said Lancaster with hiked eyebrows.

"We are in the sense that we're residing in the same condo in D.C."

"Okay, then are you two more than work partners?"

"Mary, I'm a lot older than she is."

"You didn't answer my question. And, news flash, lots of older men date much younger women."

"No, we're *not* more than work partners."

"Okay." She sat forward. "So, Hawkins?"

"Why are you having doubts? It was a clear-cut case."

"Maybe too clear-cut."

"That doesn't make sense. And what's your evidence?"

"I don't have any. And I don't know if he's telling the truth or not. But I just think since the guy's dying and he came back here to clear his name, maybe it's worth a second look."

Decker did not look convinced but said, "Okay, how about now?"

"What?" she said, looking startled.

"Let's go over to where the murders took place. I'm sure no one's moved in there after all this time, not after what happened." He paused. "Just like my old home."

"Well, you're wrong there. Someone *did* move into your old place."

Decker's jaw slackened. "Who?"

"A young couple with a little girl. The Hendersons."

"You know them?"

"Not really. But I know they moved in about six months ago."

"And the other place? Is there someone there too?"

"Somebody moved in there about five years ago. But they left about a year ago when the plastics manufacturing facility closed down and went overseas to join all the other factories that used to be in the Midwest. It's been abandoned since then."

Decker rose. "Okay, you coming? It'll be like old times."

"I'm not sure I need any more 'old times.'" But Lancaster rose too and grabbed a coat that was hanging on a wall peg. "And what if it turns out Hawkins was telling the truth?" she asked as they headed to the door.

"Then we need to find out who really did it. But we're not there yet. In fact, we're not even close."

“You don’t work here anymore, Decker. Finding a murderer here after all this time isn’t your job.”

“Finding killers is my *only* job. Wherever they might be.”