

# DAVID BALDACCI

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



LONG

CHARACTER

A MEMORY MAN THRILLER



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*A MEMORY MAN THRILLER*

DAVID  
BALDACCI

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SHADOWS



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two very special people,  
for all you have done for so many*

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## Chapter 1

WHO THE HELL IS THIS?" barked Amos Decker.

He had been awoken from a sleep far deeper than he usually achieved. The insomnia had been getting worse, and it was adding nothing positive to his already unpredictable temperament. He hadn't looked at the phone number on the screen before answering it. In his line of work, calls came at all times of the day or night and not always from those on his contact list.

"Amos, it's Mary Lancaster." Her voice was low, tenuous. "Do you remember me?"

Amos Decker sat up stiffly in his bed and rubbed his unshaven face. He saw on his phone screen that it was nearly three in the morning.

"Since I pretty much can't forget anything, it's not likely I'd forget *you*, is it, Mary?" He patted himself on both cheeks, working to remove the fuzziness from his mind. Then his thoughts settled on the timing of the call, which was in itself a warning.

In a tense voice he added, "Mary, is something wrong? Why are you even up now?"

Mary Lancaster was Decker's former partner in the Burlington Police Department in Ohio. A while back she'd been diagnosed with early onset dementia. The disease had spiraled continually downward, as her brain deteriorated and dragged the rest of her along with it.

"I'm fine. Couldn't sleep."

To Decker, she didn't sound fine at all. But he hadn't spoken to her in a while, and this might just be how she was now.

"I have trouble with that too."

"I just wanted to hear your voice. It just seemed so important to me right now. I've been working up the courage to call you."

“You don’t ever have to worry about calling me, even in the middle of the night.”

“It’s so difficult to understand time, Amos, night and then day. But then, everything is very difficult for me to understand right now. And...it’s so very frightening because...every day there seems to...be less and less of me...th-there.”

He sighed as the tragic sincerity of her words hit him especially hard. “I know, Mary. I understand why you feel that way.”

“Yes. I believed that *you* would.”

Her tone had firmed up a bit. Decker hoped it was a positive sign.

He leaned against the creaky headboard, as though using the wood to fortify his own spine in dealing with this unexpected development. Decker surveyed the dark confines of his small bedroom. He had lived here for years, but it looked like he was just moving in, or else was simply passing through.

He was a consultant with the FBI. Long before that he had suffered a near-fatal brain injury while playing professional football. His altered brain held two new attributes which, up to that point, he hadn’t even known about and had no reason to: hyperthymesia, or perfect recall; and synesthesia, which caused him to pair certain things with unlikely colors. In his case it was dead bodies linked with a shade of electric blue. After his football career ended he had become a policeman and then a detective in his hometown; thus, seeing dead bodies was not all that unusual.

He and Lancaster had successfully partnered on many cases. Having a perfect memory was a godsend for a detective, but a thousand-pound ball-and-chain for a human being. Time did not heal any of his past miseries. If anything, they were more intensified.

He lived in an apartment in Washington, DC, in a building owned by a friend of his, Melvin Mars. Decker had first met Mars while the man was on death row in Texas. He had proved Mars’s innocence, and Mars had received a substantial financial windfall for his wrongful incarceration.

He'd used some of it to buy the apartment building. Mars had recently married and moved to California.

Decker's longtime FBI partner, Alex Jamison, had been transferred to New York and found what looked to be love with a Wall Street investment banker. His old boss at the FBI, Ross Bogart, had retired and was learning to play golf—badly, he had heard—in Arizona.

That meant Decker was now alone, which he knew he would be one day. The phone call from his old partner was thus welcome, even at this hour.

“How are you, Mary? I mean, really, how are you?”

“So-so,” she said. “Every day is a...challenge.”

“But you sound good.”

“You mean I can put sentences together. The...me-medications help me with that, sometimes. This is one of those times. I'm...not usually like this. I'm usually...*not* good.”

He decided to reroute the conversation. “How are Earl and Sandy? Sleeping, I suppose.” That was Mary's husband and their daughter.

“They went to visit Earl's mother in Cleveland. She's not doing well. Probably won't be long for this world. She's old, and gaga like me, actually.”

“You don't sound gaga to me, Mary.”

“Yes, well...”

“Wait, if they're in Cleveland, who's staying with you?” The last time he had visited her, there had been an aide helping out.

“I'm okay right now, Amos. It's all right for me to be here.”

“I don't know, Mary. I don't have a good feeling about this.”

“You don't have to worry about me.”

She sounded almost like the old Mary. Almost.

But there was something else going on here that he didn't like.



## Chapter 2

DECKER PUT HIS LARGE BARE feet on the cold wood of the floor. “I’ve been meaning to come to visit you. It’s been too long. But you sound better... than last time.”

“Yes, it has been too long. Far too long. But not you. *Me.*”

Decker straightened up and eyed the window, where the city lights winked lazily at him in the darkness. “I, uh, I don’t understand,” he replied. “I guess I’m still half-asleep,” he added by way of explanation, but she wasn’t making much sense.

“This...is a terrible thing I have...in my head. It’s...awful.”

“I know, Mary. And I wish you didn’t have to deal with it.” He stopped and struggled to come up with more sympathetic words; it was a task that would have been easy for his old self, and nearly impossible for his current one. “I...I wish there was a cure.”

“For you, too,” she said. “There is no cure for you, either.” In these words he could sense her seeking some level of solidarity with him in diseases of the mind that would end up doing them both in.

“We’re a lot alike in that regard,” he agreed.

“But also *not* alike,” she retorted in a tone she hadn’t used before. It was an escalation of sorts, at least he took it that way.

Decker didn’t know how to respond to that, so he didn’t. He sat there listening to her breathing over the phone. In the ensuing silence he could also feel something building, like thrust did on an airplane about to take off. He was about to break the silence when she did.

“Does it keep changing?” she asked in a small, measured tone.

He knew exactly what she was referring to. “It seems to,” he answered. “But everyone’s mind changes, Mary, healthy or not. Nothing is static.”

Normal or not, whatever *normal* is.”

“But you’re the only one I know who truly...who could maybe understand what I’m going through.”

He heard a sound over the line and thought she might be slapping herself in the head, as though trying to dislodge in there what was slowly killing her. He tried to think of something to say, to draw her back to the conversation.

“But I thought you were getting counseling. It helped me. It can help you.”

“I did get counseling. But then I stopped getting it.”

“But why?” he said as his anxiety rose higher.

“They told me all I needed to know. After that, it was a waste of time. And I don’t have any time to waste, Amos, not one *fucking* second.” She let the blunt epithet hang there in the ether like smoke from a discharged gun.

“Mary, please let me know what’s wrong. I can tell something’s happened.”

Sharp as a pistol shot she barked, “I forgot Sandy today. Right before they left to go to Cleveland. I forgot her.”

“People forget names all the time, Mary,” said Decker, sounding a bit relieved. He sensed this was where the conversation was intended to go when all was said and done. He didn’t think this when next she spoke.

“I didn’t forget her *name*. I...I forgot who she *was*.” There came another lengthy pause where all Decker could hear was the woman’s breaths and then a sob that was so dry and drawn out it sounded like she was strangling.

“Mary, are you—”

She continued as though he hadn’t spoken. She said, “I just remembered her before I called you. And only because I looked at a photo with her name on it. I forgot I had a daughter, Amos. For a time there was

no Sandy Lancaster in existence for me. Can you understand how... terrible that is?"

He could almost sense the tears tumbling down her sallow cheeks.

"I was this close to...to not. Ever again. Forgetting my own child. My flesh and blood."

"You shouldn't be alone, Mary. I know what you said but I can't believe that Earl—"

She cut in. "Earl doesn't know that I am alone. He wouldn't want that. He's *normally* very careful about that."

Decker stood, rigid in hushed anxiety. Her response was stealthy and, far worse, coolly victorious. He could feel clammy sweat forming all over him.

"Then who's with you? The aide?"

"She was, but I made her leave."

In a bewildered tone he said, "How exactly did you manage that? She shouldn't have—"

"I have a *gun*, Amos. My old service automatic. I haven't held it in years. But it fits my hand so fine. I remembered the gun safe combination, can you believe that? After I forgot pretty much everything else, I remembered *that*. I suppose it was...an *omen* of sorts," she added offhandedly.

Every muscle that Decker had tightened. "Wait a minute, Mary. Hold on now."

"I pointed the gun at her. And she left, very quickly. Right before I called you. I woke her up, you see. With the gun. It makes you wake up fast, you know that."

Decker was now more *awake* than perhaps he'd ever been in his life. He glanced wildly around trying to think of something, anything. "Look, Mary, put the gun away right now, just put it down. And then go and sit as far away from it as you can, and just close your eyes and take deep breaths. I'll have someone there in two minutes. No, *one* minute. Just one

minute and help will be there. I won't disconnect from you. Stay on the line. I'm going to put you on hold for just a sec—"

She wasn't listening to any of this. "I forgot my daughter. I forgot S-Sandy."

"Yes, but then you remembered her. That's the point. That's...You have to keep..."

Decker clutched his chest. His breathing was ragged, his heartbeat gonging in his ears, flailing pistons of disruptive sound. He felt a stitch in his side, as though he'd run a long distance when he hadn't taken a single step. He felt nauseous and unsteady and...helpless.

He thought fast. Surely the aide would have called the police. Surely, they were already on their way there.

"What about tomorrow?" she said, interrupting these thoughts. "Will I remember her tomorrow? Or Earl? Or you? Or...me? So what does it matter? Can you tell me that?"

"Mary, listen to me—"

"She was crying so hard, my little girl was. 'Mommy doesn't know who I am.' She said it over and over and over. She was so sad, so unhappy. *I* did that to her. To my own little girl. How can you hurt someone you love so much?" Her tone was now rigid, unforgiving, and it froze the surging blood in Decker's body.

"Listen to me, Mary, listen closely, okay? You're going to get through this, okay? I'll help you get through it. But first you have to put the gun down. Right now." Decker put a hand against the wall to steady himself. He imagined the gun in her hand. She might be staring at it, considering things. The floor under his bare feet felt fluid, rocky, a ship's deck in pitchy seas. He searched his mind for the right words that would draw her back from the edge she was on, that would make her put down the little automatic that he knew she had killed at least one man with during her professional career. If he could just come up with the right words that

would let this episode end well when it could so very easily go the other way.

He was about to speak again, to convince her to wait for help. He had his lines ready. He was about to deliver them. They would make her put the gun down, he was sure of it.

Then he heard what he had prayed he would not hear.

A single shot, which he believed—because he knew Lancaster—had been delivered with deliberate care and competent accuracy. She would have chosen the temple, the chin, or the open mouth as her entry point. Any one of those would get the job done.

And then came the oppressive thud of Mary Lancaster's body hitting the floor. He was certain she was dead. Lancaster had always been a good planner, results oriented. Such people excelled at killing themselves.

"Mary? Mary!" he shouted into the phone. When no response came, his energy wilted. *Why are you screaming? She's gone. You know she is.*

He leaned back against the wall and let gravity transport his big body down to the floor, similar to the one on which Lancaster's corpse was now lying.

He was alive. She was not. Right now it was a difference without significant distinction for him. He sat there as his little room was lit by the electric blue of a death that had touched him from nearly a thousand miles distant.

Years ago Amos Decker had once come within a centimeter's width of a trigger pull of shooting himself in the mouth and ending his life.

But right now, part of him was as dead as Mary Lancaster.



## Chapter 3

*ASHES TO ASHES, DUST TO dust. And other assorted bullshit*, thought Decker.

That was the way it always ended. That and a deep, unforgiving hole closed up with dirt. A suited Decker, usually comfortable only in jeans or wrinkled khakis and a loose sweatshirt, stared down at the eternal berth-to-be in the ground. It would soon be filled with Mary Lancaster's boxed remains.

It was a chilly, drizzly day in Ohio. For this area it was very normal weather in spring, the vestiges of winter clinging like a dewy spider's web to a frosted windowpane. The crowd here was large; Earl and Mary Lancaster were well-known and well-liked, and Sandy had made many friends at her school. Decker eyed numerous former colleagues from the local police force, who all stared dourly at the ground.

Alex Jamison had been on assignment and unable to come, but had sent a card and her condolences. Ross Bogart had done the same, along with flowers. They hadn't known Lancaster that well, but Decker still wished they could have been here with him. He usually eschewed company, but not today.

The casket had been closed. The gunshot had been fired upward through the mouth, leaving Mary Lancaster beyond the magic of the mortician's cosmetics, and thus unviewable.

Decker looked over at Earl Lancaster, ashen faced and lost and old looking, as he clutched the hand of his teenage daughter, Sandy, who was learning disabled. The girl's eyes darted here and there, processing the world in her unique way. She might not understand death the way others did, Decker knew, and that might be a good thing, at least right now. But, at some point soon, she would realize her mother was gone. And she

would wonder when her mother would be back. And Decker did not relish being in Earl's position to have to explain what had really taken place when that gun had fired. There would be no good way to do so, he thought. But it still had to be done, because Sandy deserved an explanation.

Sandy suddenly caught sight of Decker, broke free from her startled father's grip, and ran over to him. She stared up at the giant man, her face sparkling in a sea of gloom.

"You're Amos Decker," she declared brightly.

This was a game that they played; well, *she* did. And Decker always answered as he was about to now, though it was not easy to form the words this time.

"I know I am. And you're Sandy Lancaster."

She grinned and cracked, "I know I am."

As soon as she finished speaking, Decker's features crumpled.

*I forgot who she was. For a time there was no Sandy Lancaster in existence for me.*

Mary Lancaster, at least in her mind, could not have committed a graver sin than not remembering that her daughter existed. He was certain that was what had placed the finger on the trigger and given her the strength to pull it.

He felt a nudge on his hand and opened his eyes to see Sandy's small, slender fingers curling around his long, thick ones.

"Amos Decker?" she said again, watching him carefully, perhaps too carefully. For some reason he knew what she was going to ask, and it panicked him beyond all reason. "Where's my mommy? There are so many people. Do you see her somewhere? I need to talk to her."

Decker had never lied to Sandy, not once. He couldn't lie to her now, so he said nothing.

"Sandy!" Earl came running over and took his daughter's hand. "Sorry, Amos."