

CHAPTER 3

Friday, November 29

Decker lived in a two-story townhouse on Thirty-first Street, near Corcoran, in the historic district of Georgetown. He parked his BMW Z8 in the Custom House lot right next door and slipped into his garden through the side entrance—a cast iron gate featuring floral motifs, set in a twelve-foot, glass-studded brick wall.

Marisol was inside, in the kitchen. Decker could see her framed in the window by the magnolia tree, leaning over the sink, watching TV as she washed the dishes. It was late, around ten, and Becca was already in bed.

Decker stood there for a moment in the garden without going in, simply watching. Bare of their leaves, the branches of the great pair of sixty-foot sourgum trees straddling him were riddled with stars. He could pick out Orion, the belt and, below it, his sword. He could pick out the Dog Star, bright Sirius, too, the hunter's loyal companion. With a sigh, Decker entered the house.

Marisol was happy to see him. Barely five feet, with a friendly round face, his housekeeper was anxious to leave. "It's my niece's *quinceañera* tomorrow. I've got to go home to make the *pavo en pepián*," she told him in the machine-gun-fast Spanish dialect unique to her Tacanec region of Guatemala. But she still insisted on making him dinner. "You need to eat," she informed him, using *vos* instead of *tú*, another sign of her heritage.

Decker spun her about, trying to turn off his mind. He plucked her jacket from the peg on the wall. "I'll make something—don't worry," he answered in Spanish. "Any trouble at bedtime?" He handed Marisol her jacket and they moved away from the kitchen, down the hall, toward the foyer.

"No, no problem. Becca is good girl, Mr. John," she said, switching to English. "Good girl. She finish her homework, watch SpongeBob, take shower. Then she go right to bed. No problem." She slipped on her coat. "I see you tomorrow? Six-thirty, Mr. John?"

"Yes, I'll see you tomorrow," said Decker, closing the door.

Though the brick townhouse was originally constructed in 1858, the previous owners had renovated the kitchen less than a year before Decker had bought it, and it featured a sixty-inch BlueStar Gas Range, a sub-zero refrigerator, and a glass-fronted wine cooler. It filled Decker with a great wave of indescribable pleasure to see the glimmering stainless steel stove, with its six powerful burners, plus two ovens, each large enough to accommodate an eighteen by twenty-six-inch pan. *A man and his tools*, Decker thought.

He took off his jacket, threw it over a chair, and poured himself a glass of Merlot. The ten o'clock news was on the TV in the corner, churning out the latest gore porn. Today, it was some airplane disaster.

". . . the mid-air collision of America Airlines flight 1561 and Apex Air flight 24 occurred over the Milk Creek County Forest Preserve near Batavia, Illinois, some twenty-five miles west of Chicago. According to airline officials, 223 passengers and crew were aboard the two planes, and all are believed to have perished. A preliminary report indicates that a computer malfunction within the air traffic control system may have been the cause of—"

Decker turned off the TV. He linked his Samsung droid to the wireless sound system and John Coltrane's ballad "Naima" started to play. He checked the refrigerator. Nothing much. Some old Chinese takeout and a plastic container of pasta with pesto. A wedge of manchego. That plate of leftover Thanksgiving turkey. And a package of chanterelle mushrooms that had seen better days. Decker took out the mushrooms and two cage-free eggs. As he separated the yolks from the whites, he paused for a moment to listen. The ballad was written as a love letter to Trane's then-wife, Juanita Naima, and the rich, complex cords were so reverential and restrained that they seemed to stand still, to almost hover there . . . in mid-air.

Decker fixed his omelet, sprinkled it with freshly chopped parsley, and sat down at the counter to eat. Eventually, the track came to an end. He sat there alone, with his eggs and his wine, in a stultifying silence. Only the sound of his fork on the plate, the groans of the old townhouse as it settled for winter, and the odd truck passing by in the street broke the stillness. *I guess I was hungry after all*, he thought with surprise. Though, even now, seconds later, he could barely remember the taste.

He washed the dishes, grabbed his jacket and made his way down the hall to the stairs. Without looking at the photographs on the wall, he climbed through the darkness, one hand on the rail. At the top

of the stairs, Decker turned on the hall light, threw his jacket on the bed in his bedroom, and then headed down the corridor to see Becca.

His daughter's bedroom was at the end of the hall, to the right. The door was cracked slightly open and he peeked in before entering. His seven year old was curled up in her bed, her face illuminated by the light with the seahorses spinning, and the red Cyclops eye of the nanny-cam in the corner. She looked sound asleep. Decker crept in through the door.

It was a large bedroom, with two windows on one side looking out onto the old Federal Customs House, now a post office, and another facing the garden. Becca's bed was tucked in the corner, her dressing table beside it.

Decker stood by the bed, taking in her small face, the dirty blond hair, her round nose and dark eyebrows. He started to reach for her. He wanted to pick her up, to hold her, but he suddenly stopped.

Why wake her? he told himself in his perennial quest for some alternate truth. She looked so peaceful, carefree. He could see her eyes trembling just under the eyelids and he realized his daughter was dreaming. *Let her sleep,* he admonished himself.

But the truth bubbled up through the darkness regardless. The truth was, he'd had a hard time connecting with his daughter lately. For some time now. Ever since . . .

Decker looked over at the dressing table. Next to the hair brush and scrunchies, just past the jewelry box, he spied the small silver frame. He took a hesitant step toward the dressing table, picked it up.

The photograph featured Becca on Emily's lap, gliding down a blue waterslide at that hotel in Orlando. They were both wearing bikinis and Mickey Mouse ears. Their arms were extended, as if in an attempt to stay balanced, to fly, and their mouths were wide open. They were laughing hysterically but there was a glimmer of fear in their eyes. As if they both knew what was coming—just ahead, down that slide. Becca had been around four then. Perhaps, four and a half. About a year shy of the accident.

Decker rubbed his thumb along the clear plane of the glass, across the image of Emily.

It had been twenty-six months and four days since his wife's death in that plane crash near Dallas. She had flown down to handle an interview, which had originally been scheduled for him, but Decker had been too busy at work. *Too busy,* he thought. He stared at the photograph. They had been promoting their book then, *The Wave*, about the El Aqrab incident, during their fifteen minutes of fame, and they had been arguing just before she had jumped into a cab for the airport.

"You don't mind spending the money it generates," she had told him. "But you refuse to promote it. It's always one excuse or another. I still teach, you know. I have a job too."

She had flown off with Becca . . . and crashed.

Decker put the photograph back down on the dressing table. It was a miracle Becca had survived the experience. Barely five, she had been found in the wreckage, curled up in the arms of her mother. With nary a scratch.

Perhaps he sensed her gaze because when Decker looked down at his daughter, she was staring up at him, a stuffed animal pressed to her chest. Her cheetah, Sylvester. "I thought you were sleeping. I'm sorry," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"How come you always stand there in the dark?"

He began to fuss with her comforter. "Do I?"

"You think that I'm sleeping, but I see you. It's kind of creepy, you know."

Decker laughed. "I'm just checking on you," he replied.

"Is that why you put in the nanny-cam?"

"That's right. To be safe. To make sure you're alright."

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm not afraid of the dark anymore."

"No more nightmares?"

"Not really," she said, stuffing Sylvester just under the comforter. "Not like you, anyway."

"What does that mean?"

"I hear you sometimes. You call out her name. Mommy's name."

Decker sat down on the bed right beside her. He smiled a crooked smile and said, "I'll try and be

more circumspect in my sleep from now on.”

“Circum—what?”

“Not as noisy,” he said. “Go to sleep, little Cheetah. It’s late.” He reached over, kissed her forehead.

Becca looked up at him with a concerned look in her eyes.

“And it’s a school night,” he added.

“I remember her too, you know.”

“I know you do, honey.”

“But it’s like an old drawing, like one of my dragons. After a while, when you hold them a lot, they get wrinkly and faded. Like the ones I did back in first grade.”

“Don’t worry. If you ever forget what she looks like, I’ll remind you. Go to sleep now.” Decker climbed to his feet. His legs felt like lead. *I should stop off at the dōjō in the morning*, he thought.

Becca pointed to her chest, made a sign like a heart in the air, pointed at him, and then shaped a bowtie ellipsis.

“I love you too,” he replied. “For infinity.”

When he returned to his bedroom, Decker undressed, hung up his tie and his suit in the closet, and ducked into the bathroom to wash up. He brushed his teeth while examining his face in the mirror. The feel of the electric toothbrush vibrating his gums was a jaw-numbing distraction. It felt good but he brushed way too hard and his gum started bleeding, just a little, by the labial canine. He spat into the sink, watched the blood roll in a ball toward the drain. Then he looked back at his face in the mirror.

Ever since Emily’s death, he’d been playing the part of himself. Only a few of his friends were aware of his emptiness, like Rex, at the Center, plus his uncle, Tom, back in Davenport, Iowa, where Decker had grown up.

He thought about his work at the FBI, which he had joined after graduating from Northwestern and a brief stint as a Quad Cities policeman. His training had taught him how to put on disguises, how to become different people as a way to adapt to mercurial landscapes. Decker was used to leading a double life. On the outside, he had recovered from the tragedy of his wife’s sudden passing, just as he had from the car accident which had resulted in his parents’ death years before.

He touched the scar on his face.

Now—at least on the surface—he appeared to be back to his ebullient self: the guy who remembered and organized birthday parties for friends and associates; always a reliable team-mate at work, unselfish and dedicated, unstinting with praise, though a bit OCD; good-looking and funny; well-read, a code whiz, a linguist, but not overly bookish; a black belt in Kung Fu; and humble—despite the fame that had been foisted upon him after the El Aqrab incident.

But, on the inside, thought Decker, *I’ve become . . . someone else.*

“Who are you?” he said aloud to the man in the mirror. “Is anybody in there?” He wiped his face with a towel. Then he smiled, feeling foolish, and turned out the light.