

Ridley
Pearson

Beyond
Recognition

HYPERION

BEYOND
RECOGNITION

RIDLEY PEARSON

 HYPERION

NEW YORK

Praise for *Beyond Recognition*

“Patricia Cornwell could take lessons from Sergeant Lou Boldt and police psychologist Daphne Matthews ... [Pearson] switches gears each time you think the story’s got to be winding down in the exhilarating entertainment.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Save this one for a weekend because you won’t put it down until you’ve reached the heart-pounding conclusion.”

—*Playboy*

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“You have to be a masochist to give in to a Pearson plot, but when you do, it hurts so good.”

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“One hell of a writer. He grabs, he twists, he tightens the screws until you’re drained by a superior read.”

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—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Tells an irresistible tale.”

—*The Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Excels at writing novels that grip the imagination.”

—*People*

Dedication

Beyond Recognition is dedicated to my parents, Betsy and Bob Pearson, for all the great years, past, present, and future, and to my wife, Marcelle, for her love and guidance.

Epigraph

The world, an entity out of everything, was created by neither gods nor men, but was, is, and will be eternally living fire, regularly becoming ignited and regularly becoming extinguished.

—Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragments*
no. 20 (c. 480 B.C.)

We all live in a house on fire, no fire department to call; no way out, just the upstairs window to look out of while the fire burns the house down with us trapped, locked in it.

—Tennessee Williams, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1961)

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Excerpt: *The Pied Piper*

About the Author

Also by Ridley Pearson

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IN MEMORY OF:

Susan Carol Hill
Detective Sergeant Portland Police Bureau
Lost on TWA Flight 800
July 17, 1996

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Nancy Luff

Albert Zuckerman

The fire began at sunset.

It filled the house like a hot putrid breath, alive. It ran like a liquid through the place, stopping nothing, feeding on everything in its path, irreverent and unforgiving. It raced like a phantom, room to room, eating the drapes, the rugs, the towels, sheets, and linens, the clothes, the shoes, and blankets, the closets, removing any and all evidence of things human. It invaded the various rooms like an unchecked virus raiding neighboring cells, contaminating, infecting, consuming. It devoured the wood of the doorjambs, swarmed the walls, fed off the paint, and blistered the ceiling. Lightbulbs vaporized, sounding like a string of Black Cat firecrackers. This was no simple fire.

It vaporized the small furniture, chairs, tables, dressers, all dissolving in its wake. It refinished and then devoured the desk she had bought at a weekend flea market, a desk she had stripped of its ugly green paint and lovingly resurfaced with a transparent plastic coating guaranteed by the manufacturer to last thirty years.

Longer than she lasted.

For Dorothy Enwright, it was more like a camera's flash popping in the dark. It began long before any clothes or rooms were claimed. It began as a strange growling sound deep within the walls. At first she imagined an earthquake. This was dispelled by the quick and surprisingly chilling spark of the far side of her eyelids. To her it began not as heat but as a flash of bone-numbing cold.

It burned off her hair, the skin on her face—and she went over backward, her throat seared, unable to scream. In a series of popping sounds, her bones exploded, brittle and fast, like pine needles dumped on a fire.

The toilets and sinks melted, a sudden flow of bubbling porcelain, running like lava.

Dorothy Enwright was dead within the first twenty seconds of the burn. But before she died she visited hell, a place that Dorothy Enwright did not belong. She had no business there, this woman. No business, given that a member of the fire department had received a threat eleven hours earlier, and the person receiving that threat had failed to act upon it.

By the time the fire hoses were through, little existed for Seattle's Marshal Five fire inspector to discover or collect as evidence. Little existed of the truth. The truth, like the home of Dorothy Enwright and Dorothy herself, had gone up in smoke, destroyed beyond recognition.

The Boldts' home phone rang at six-forty in the evening, September tenth, a Tuesday. Elizabeth, who would be forty in March, passed her husband the receiver and released a huge sigh to make a point of her disgust at the way his police work interfered with their lives.

Boldt croaked out a hello. He felt bone tired. He didn't want Liz thrown into a mood.

They had seen their precious Sarah to sleep only moments before and had stretched out on their backs to take a fifteen-minute break. Miles was occupied by a set of blocks in the corner.

The bedding smelled of Liz, and he wished that the phone hadn't rung because he hated to see her angry. She had every right to be angry because she'd been complaining about the phone being on her side of the bed for the past four *years*, and Boldt had never done a thing about it. He didn't understand exactly *why* he hadn't done anything about it; she mentioned it all the time, and replacing the phone cord with something longer wasn't the most technically challenging job in the world. He reached over to touch her shoulder in apology, but caught himself and returned his hand to his side. No sense in making things worse.

Cupping the phone, he explained to her: "A fire." Boldt was homicide, so it had to be a serious fire.

She sighed again, which meant she didn't care much about the content of the phone call, only its duration.

"Keep your voice down," Liz cautioned wisely. Sarah was a light sleeper, and the crib was only a few feet away, against the bedroom wall where Boldt's dresser had once been.

The baby's crying began immediately, as if on Liz's cue. Boldt thought it was her mother's voice that triggered it, not his, but he wasn't about to argue the point.

Boldt took down the address and hung up.

Liz walked over to the crib and Boldt admired her. She kept herself trim and fit. The second time around, that had been a challenge. She looked ten years younger than other mothers the same age. As the cradled baby came eagerly to her mother's breast, Lou Boldt felt his throat tighten with loving envy. There were unexpected moments in his life that would remain with him forever, seared into his consciousness like photographs, and this was one of them. He nearly forgot about the phone call.

Liz talked quietly to the baby. She glanced over at her husband. "I'm sorry I snapped at you," she said.

"I'll move the phone," Boldt promised her.

"Sometime this decade would be nice," she said. They grinned at each other, and their smiles widened, and Lou Boldt thought himself lucky to share his life with her, and he told her so, and she blushed. She lay back on the bed with the child at her breast. Miles was into creating the second story of his block fort. Maybe he'd grow up to be an architect, Boldt thought. Anything but a cop.

Lou Boldt smelled the fire before he ever reached it. Its ghost, spilled out like entrails, blanketed most of Wallingford, settling down onto Lake Union as a thin, wispy fog. It didn't smell of death, more like wet charcoal. But if, as a sergeant of Crimes Against Persons, Boldt was being called to a fire, it was because a person or persons had perished and Marshal Five had already made a call of suspicious origin. Someone had torched a building. Someone else was dead.

There were a lot of fires in Seattle in any given year. Not so many homicides, not by national standards. ~~The two seldom mixed, and when they did it was always—~~*always*, he emphasized himself silently—one or more firefighters. The Pang fire had been the most recent and the worst: four firemen dead in an arson fire. Four years in the past, it was still vivid in the collective mind of the city. Boldt had worked that case as well. He didn't want another one.

He had been off-duty at the time of the call. Rightfully speaking, the investigation belonged to a detective other than himself. Yet there he was, a little overweight, a little gray at the temples, feeling a little anxious, speeding the department-issue beat-up Chevy toward the address he had scribbled on a sheet of notepaper torn from a pad given to him as a Christmas stocking present. Duty bound is what he was. As the department's "most veteran" homicide cop—a pleasant way of saying he was a little too old for the job—Boldt was assigned more than his fair share of the tough cases. In his line of work, success was its own penalty.

Many times he had considered the thought that Lieutenant Phil Shoswitz assigned him those most difficult cases in an effort to persuade him to apply for, and accept, a lieutenant's desk. But Boldt was not easily moved from his position. He preferred people to paperwork.

Fire scenes instilled fear in him, even from a respectable distance. It wasn't the flashing lights; he was long since accustomed to those. It wasn't the tangle of the hoses, or the wet, glistening pavement, or the supernatural look of the behemoth firemen in their turnout gear, helmeted and masked. It was the damp musk smell, the smudged filth that accompanied any fire, and Boldt's own active imagination that too easily invented a claustrophobic room entirely engulfed in flames and he, a fireman, smack in the middle of it, aiming a fire hose in revenge: the burning ceiling giving out, the floor breaking away underneath, a wall coming down. To die in fire had to be the worst.

Battalion Chief Witt, clad in his turnouts, met Boldt as the sergeant approached one of the pumper trucks where the crew was busy packing up the rig. Witt had a florid face and bloodshot eyes. He reminded Boldt of an Irish drinker, the kind of guy to come across in a Boston pub. He shook hands firmly. "Marshal Five's in there," he said, indicating what remained of the house—precious little.

The September air was a pleasant temperature, even without the heat still radiating from the site. Boldt wore a khaki windbreaker, a cotton sweater, and khaki pants. He carried his hands in his pockets, but not to keep them warm. His posture reflected a tension, a tightness; the cables in his neck showed as his jaw muscles flexed into hard nuts.

"He called it in to our arson boys," Boldt informed him. "Must have been mention of a body because they called me."

"No body found so far," Witt explained. "A neighbor says he saw her in there, though. Saw her just a couple minutes before the flash." He repeated, "Flash, *not* explosion," as if this should hold some significance for the sergeant. Boldt experienced a sinking feeling. He had a lot to learn, and all caught up at that.

"Your department," Boldt said honestly. "Or Marshal Five's. My concern is the body."

"If we ever find her."

"Will we?" Boldt had to shout above the sound of the trucks' mechanicals, the bark of the radios, and the shouting between firefighters still on the site. "Find her?" he finished.

Witt answered obliquely. "ME's on the way."

Dr. Ronald Dixon, one of Boldt's closest friends and a fellow jazz enthusiast, was King County's chief medical examiner. Boldt welcomed his participation.

Boldt asked, "What's that mean? Is there a body or not?"

"This baby was one hot sucker, Sergeant. What started in there and what ended up in there are two

different things, ya know? Two different animals.” Witt, too, shouted to be heard. “If she’s in there there’s not much left. That’s what I’m saying. Hot,” he repeated ominously. “Like nothing I ever seen. Like nothing I want to see again, ya know? A real showy son-of-a-bitch, this one was.”

“Marshal Five called it?” Boldt asked, seeking to verify that the cause of the fire had been ruled suspicious origin. Witt’s eyes darted to and from the site. He seemed to be keeping something from himself. It troubled Boldt.

“I’m assuming so,” the chief answered. “Else why would you be here? Am I right?” He added, “Listen, Sergeant, we put the wet stuff on the red stuff. Marshal Five handles the rest.”

“Something bothering you?” Boldt asked bluntly.

“It flashed; it didn’t blow—that’s if you trust the witness. It burned real hot. Only thing close to Blackstock or Pang. We shoot for a four- to six-minute response time. We were six, maybe eight on this baby. Not bad, not our best. But she was ripping long before we got here. Ripping mean, is what I’m saying. Ripping hot, right up through the center of the structure; a weird burn is what it was. You check air traffic control, Sergeant. That’s what you do. My guess is six, seven hundred, maybe a thousand feet in the first thirty seconds. Something on that order. Something big. Bigger than stink. You’ve been in this as long as I have and that shit scares you, that’s all. It scares you.” He walked off leaving Boldt with water seeping in through the soles of his shoes and the taste of charcoal in his mouth and nostrils.

It was the taste that confirmed it. A taste that wouldn’t go away completely for two or three days—he knew as much the moment it rolled over his tongue. As foul a taste as a person could experience.

A dead body. No question about it.

“Get out of here. Go upstairs, or watch TV or something.”

Ben had never seen the man with this particular girl before, but she wasn't much different from any of the others—a waitress, maybe, or just a girl from the bar: big boobs and tight jeans—not much different.

The guy, who called himself Ben's father but wasn't, drew closer. “You listening to me, kid? Definitely the bar. He smelled of it: cigarettes and beer. He blinked a pair of glassy eyes, unable to focus. Pot too, probably, Ben thought. He smoked a lot of the stuff. Weekends he started smoking pot with his first cup of coffee, around noon.

The man's name was Jack Santori, and Ben owned that same last name, but not by birth. He hated the man, though hate was too soft a word.

“You told me to clean up the kitchen,” Ben protested, reminding Jack of the earlier order. He felt confused and angry. Bone tired. He wished he were eighteen instead of twelve; he wished he could walk right out the door and never come back—the same way his mother had. He missed his mother something fierce. “I washed the sheets,” he said, hoping to pick up some credit. He had been told to wash the sheets *before* starting in on the kitchen, and that's just what he had done, so maybe the bastard would cut him some slack.

“Upstairs,” Jack ordered, walking unsteadily toward the fridge and rummaging on the shelves for a pair of beers. He asked the girl, “Brew?” and as she nodded her boobs jiggled. She cast a sympathetic look in Ben's direction, but it wouldn't help because she was new around here. She didn't know Jack. If she lasted more than one or two nights it would be a record. Ben knew what went on down there every night; Jack was rough with them. Same way he was rough with Ben. Best thing about seeing him that drunk was he'd sleep until noon. Best thing about the girl being with him was he probably wouldn't hit Ben in front of her. Jack tried to make out like they were friends. The man had lying down to science.

He had married Ben's mother when Ben was five and she was out of money. She cut hair for a living, but she had been fired. She had explained it all to Ben; she had apologized. “Jack's a pretty nice guy, and he can provide for us.” She was proved wrong on both counts, but she was gone now, so what did it matter? Ben was stuck with the guy.

“Upstairs. Now!” Jack shouted. The girl stiffened with that tone of voice, and her boobs stuck straight out. Ben had heard that same slurred anger too often to fear it, and besides, he knew the guy wouldn't hit him in front of her. Not the first night.

Ben turned off the water, dried his hands, and glanced at the girl. Her shirt wasn't buttoned right. Her hair was tousled. Her lipstick was smeared, deforming her mouth. It repulsed him. He knew what they did down there in that room. He washed the sheets, after all. Every now and then he saw one of the girls walking around naked in the morning—the only good thing about them coming over. But that meant he saw the bruises too, and he knew only too well where they came from. Jack liked to preter how he was so tough. He didn't know that Ben occasionally heard him crying down there when he was all alone. Sobbing like a baby. If Ben hadn't feared him so much, he might have found room to pity him.

Jack and his blond bar girl went at it most of that night, Ben unable to sleep for all the noise. F

was just drifting off when the headboard started slapping the wall again like someone beating a drum and the girl with her moaning, and everything got faster until the headboard sounded like it was going to beat a hole in the wall. She cried out like he was killing her, and then it stopped, and Ben wondered if maybe he *had* killed her. He seemed capable of it. There wasn't much that Ben would put past Jack.

When morning finally showed its mercy by allowing the sun to rise, Ben got dressed and got the hell out of there before the trouble began. Trouble came with pain in that house. It was to be avoided at all costs.

The southeast neighborhood where he lived was mostly black and poor. The houses were old and beat up, the cars parked outside them, not much different. He and his mom had lived better before Jack came along, though Ben didn't remember much about those days anymore. He'd never met his real father.

The roadside gutters were littered with soggy trash, and there was a smell like garbage because the stray dogs got into the black plastic bags every trash day, which was Wednesday. Most of the houses showed chipped paint and carried moss-covered roofs half-rotten from the long wet winter. Occasionally a building was condemned, its residents evicted. It seemed to happen pretty much at random. He wasn't sure where those people went, didn't know what would happen if Jack's house was condemned. He couldn't think about it. He didn't like to think beyond tomorrow or the day after. Next week seemed an eternity away.

He climbed up the hill, the growling sound of a jet overhead, a hum of traffic from Martin Luther King Boulevard. The gangs were about the only thing Ben feared. They shot each other over stupid stuff. Ben kept to himself and walked fast. Once a kid had tried to recruit him to be a drug runner, and it was only through clever thinking that Ben had avoided the job without getting beat up for refusing. He had pulled out his glass eye, his left eye, and, holding it in the palm of his hand, had explained that with only one good eye he couldn't see who was coming from his left, so he made an easy target. A real gross-out, the eye trick worked every time.

The glass eye was the result of a birth defect—Peter's anomaly—and though Ben wished he had two eyes like everyone else, the trick of popping out his glass eye came in handy every now and then. Like with girls. They screamed and ran the other way, which was just fine with him. Who needed girls?

Except Emily. She didn't count as a girl, even if she was one, technically speaking. She lived at 115A 21st Avenue East, a small purple house with dark blue trim. There was a six-foot-high metal globe of the world on her lawn, along with a plastic pink flamingo and a miniature Negro painted whiteface and holding a sign that read FORTUNES \$10—TAROT—ASTROLOGY. There was a blue neon sign in the window that read YOUR FUTURE, YOUR PAST—AT LAST! There were white stars and pale blue moons painted on the purple siding. There was a flagstone path that Ben followed to the front door. He knocked twice rather than ring the bell. There was no car parked in the drive, so he assumed she didn't have a customer.

"Come in, Ben." Emily always knew it was him. Just how, he wasn't sure. People doubted her powers, talked about her behind her back, but Ben knew better. Emily possessed a gift, and the gift was *real*.

"I didn't see a car," he explained. Not all of Emily's customers arrived by car, which was why he had knocked. If she had not answered, he would not have knocked for a second time; he would have either waited up the cedar tree alongside her driveway or sneaked in the back door.

“Business will pick up,” she promised. Emily was rarely wrong about anything. She had rich brown hair, kind blue eyes, and was probably about the same age as his mother, which was old—somewhere around thirty. She wore a flowered dress with a red plastic belt, pink stockings, and red high-top sneakers. The house smelled like maple syrup. She left the door for him to shut and led the way to the kitchen, the pair of them moving with a comfortable familiarity, like mother and son—which was how Ben liked to think of it.

On the way to the kitchen they passed through the room in which she told fortunes. The ceiling was draped in parachute cloth dyed sky blue, the sheer fabric gathered around a white globe ceiling fixture that was on a dimmer always set low. Below the light was a round table with a black tablecloth and two ladderback cane-seat chairs with round black pillows for cushions. On the table was a leaded glass candle holder for a single red candle that burned at eye height so it partially blinded the customer when he or she ventured a look at the hostess. A thumb-worn deck of tarot cards was set to the left of Emily’s place, and below the lip of the table were three switches that allowed her to control the mood of the room. The most impressive special effect in her limited arsenal was the ability to project a good rendition of the summer night sky onto the parachute cloth, which she utilized as atmosphere in the event a customer wanted an astrological reading. The small gray box taped to the underside of the table alongside these switches controlled the radio-transmitter earpiece insert that Emily wore. The walls of the room were painted in a confused assortment of fat Buddhas sitting with partially clothed vixens in Hindu-inspired postures and a bad rendition of Zeus with a lightning bolt, all colored in a psychedelic assortment of yellow, blue, and red.

It was the bare-breasted women that kept Ben from suggesting to Emily that she repaint the room.

“How was he last night?” she asked him, once they were into the kitchen through the swinging door.

“The same. A new girl.”

“Drunk?”

“Both of them.”

“He hit you?”

“No, not with a new girl, he wouldn’t do that.” He considered this. “Though he hit *her*, I think. Sounded like he did, the way she was screaming. I don’t know,” he said, not wanting to work her anger into a lather, pretending to reconsider. “It might have just been ... you know, that they were ... you know.” He felt himself blush. He tried to avoid mentioning the sex that went on in that room, because Emily said it was wrong of the guy to allow Ben to hear them going at it, but with walls and floors lined with paper there wasn’t much choice.

“I’m working on it,” she promised, as she fixed the tea. She let him drink the real thing—caffeinated tea. Milk. Sugar.

“I know you are,” he answered her.

“I’m trying.”

“I know,” Ben said. He knew what she was up to. She wanted them to be together. He also knew she wouldn’t push him. She needed evidence against Jack if she was to have any chance of breaking Ben free of him. And Ben didn’t feel like giving evidence. He didn’t feel like talking to a social worker about it; he wouldn’t allow Emily to take pictures of his bruises. He had his reasons. If he offered evidence, if Jack was questioned by the police—or whoever did that kind of thing—and for some reason Emily failed, the guy would beat him senseless, maybe even kill him. Ben knew this, deep down inside himself, where he hid the pain inflicted on him and the mountain of fear that made him question his every move, his every word. Better not to try at all than to try and fail—this he knew, no matter what arguments she threw at him. This was a matter of survival. This was not something up f

discussion.

~~They drank the tea in relative quiet; Emily used silence to punish Ben. He was used to it. She had pleaded; she had cried. Recently she had turned to this nudging, expecting Ben to make some offer and sulking when he refused to take the hint. He didn't want to play along, and yet he loved Emily and didn't want to let her down. He heard himself say, "I'm not ready."~~

"They can protect you," she said.

"No," he answered. "You don't know him." He could have said Jack needed him. He could have explained that the guy cried alone in the dark. He could have tried to express how utterly convinced he was that Jack would not let him leave under any circumstances—and how he would come looking if he lost Ben to a bunch of social workers. "You don't know him," Ben repeated with a dry throat. She hadn't brought this up in a long time; he wondered why she bothered to try again. She knew perfectly well how he felt.

He was saved from further discussion by the sound of a car in the gravel drive. They both heard it.

"I told you," Emily said with loving eyes.

Ben smiled at her. They were a team again. They had work to do.

Ben grabbed the hand-held device. Emily tucked the clear plastic earpiece under her dark hair and into her ear. "Check," he said, into the device, and Emily nodded. He slipped out the back door as Emily went off to answer the doorbell. Midday on a Saturday could mean either a man or a woman. The same time of day during the week would have meant a woman for sure. He moved down the concrete steps and over to the corner of the house, where he edged his eye out just far enough to see down the driveway to the beater yellow Ford Pinto wagon.

"They're paying me to tell them what they want to hear," Emily had explained to him a long time ago. "The more we learn, the more we know about them, the closer we come to telling them what they want to hear, the happier they are, the more they keep coming back." It made sense to Ben. He had no problem with spying on them. To him it was a game. It was fun. And he knew he was good at it, and he pleased him to be good—really good—at something. Emily said that someday he would make one heck of a cop.

He heard the front door thump shut and went right to work. He walked briskly to the car, glanced once at the front door to make sure the driver was indeed inside for a reading, and began his assessment. The sticker on the windshield was an employee parking permit for the U. There were three of them, all different colors, different years. Looking through the passenger's side window he spotted a Victoria's Secret catalog addressed to a Wendy Davis at a street address that placed her about a mile north of Green Lake. On the floor were two mashed candy boxes for SourBoys. In the back seat, a baby's safety seat was strapped in facing backward, looking at a rusted dog guard wire wall that sequestered the empty rear area from the front of the car.

He glanced again at the house, lifted the walkie-talkie, carefully checking the volume knob, and bringing his lips close, spoke the woman's name clearly—"Wendy Davis"—followed by a description of the cluttered condition of the car's interior, the fact that it was an old beat-up Ford, the presence of a child's seat, and the existence of candy boxes indicating the likelihood of an older child as well. "Hold it," he said, noticing the newspaper wedged between the plastic median and the driver's seat. He came around the vehicle quickly. The paper was folded open to the want ads. A number of apartment rentals were circled. He reported this important find. "She's house hunting. It's yesterday's paper." He

wouldn't open the car door, no matter how tempted; that was against the law and could get Emily in serious trouble, which would ruin everything. He wondered if some of the employment want ads were circled as well, but he would never know.

Bingo! he thought, as he caught sight of the two passport-size color photos stuck into the plastic behind the car's speedometer. One was of a baby boy, the other of an older boy, perhaps five years old. He reported this, as well as the fact that the woman smoked Marlboro Lights and drank cans of decaffeinated Diet Coke. "Maybe religious," he added, noticing the small black cross that hung from the rearview mirror. He chastised himself for not noticing this right away. Sometimes he missed the obvious stuff in his determination to see absolutely everything. The challenge was to build a life out of a car's interior. Some people made it easier than others.

This had been a pretty good haul. He returned by the back door into the kitchen. Soft New Age music purred from the other room, played in part to cover any chance of a customer hearing the earpiece: xylophone, flute, and guitar. A far cry from the Springsteen that Jack played when he was working the girls in his bedroom. "Born to Run" was what he always started with. If he was really drunk, he played air guitar along with the record and shouted his tone-deaf melodies, believing he was actually singing. Ben hated him. He had never hated anything or anyone before Jack's arrival on the scene.

He heard Emily's voice cut through the soft patter of the music as she told her customer, "I'm getting an image of a problem ... a worry ... a decision, perhaps"

"Yes!" the unseen woman gasped in astonishment.

"And one ... no, two boys. Children."

"Oh, my God!" the woman exclaimed.

"Your children?"

"Yeah! I can't believe—"

"An infant ..."

"Charles. Charlie," Wendy Davis said.

"And the other is older—what?—four or five?"

"Harry! Just turned five."

"You're concerned for them," the fortune teller said.

"Yeah."

"I see suitcases ... cardboard boxes.... Moving, are we?"

The customer released an audible gasp. "Oh, my gosh," she said. "You're for real!" She chuckled sounding giddy. "I'm sorry. Of *course* you're for real. I only meant that ... I don't know ... it's just that—" she laughed again—"I mean, a psychic and all.... Oh, my gosh. How did you ...? But of course ... I can't believe this!"

"Looking for a new place to live," Emily said patiently. "Concerned for the children over the move? You live near a lake—"

"Green Lake," the woman shouted—*shouted!*—enthusiastically. "Yes! Yes!" she continued sounding like one of the guy's bedroom partners on the way to a high-pitched scream. "I can't believe this!"

Ben felt proud that he had done such a good job. Sometimes the car turned out to be borrowed and the session a complete disaster; those customers rarely returned. But this one would be back, he felt certain of it. Emily would be thrilled, and he lived for her praise.

The customer stayed longer than the fifteen minutes promised her for her ten dollars. This upped Emily's fee to twenty, but there weren't any complaints. Judging by her expression as she left, Ben

believed Wendy Davis was noticeably happier, which made him feel good. This was Emily's stated goal. She only added her ominous warnings at the end of the session to keep the customer returning. "I see something darker in the near future" was her typical line. Something about work, or the family, or health—those were the real showstoppers, the live worm on the end of the hook that proved irresistible. And like a hairdresser or a doctor, Emily kept an appointment book. She could "fit you in if you were lucky. Every one of her customers was lucky.

"You need something to eat," she announced, as she entered the kitchen. One of Emily's passions was food; she seemed to him to always be around the refrigerator, inspecting its contents. "You're fat, too skinny."

"I'm twelve years old," Ben declared. He used this argument on Jack, but to mixed results.

"Too skinny," she repeated. "I've got some pork loin for you," she exclaimed. "My Aunt Bernice's recipe. Marinated in lemon juice, oregano, salt, and pepper.... Do you like garlic? Yeah, you do," she answered rhetorically. "Olive oil." She pulled the thing out of the refrigerator and set it on the counter. It was just a tube of pink meat with soggy green specks all over it. It looked disgusting. "Don't worry," she said, catching his expression, "it's better than it looks."

An hour later they were eating lunch at her kitchen table. He liked the mashed potatoes most of all. "We can have the leftovers for dinner," she said, talking with her mouth full of food. If he did it she screamed at him, but she did it all the time. He liked Emily—loved her, maybe—but he didn't understand her. Not completely.

He was glad she mentioned dinner, because it meant he didn't have to think about going *there*. Jack would leave for the bar by seven; it would be safe to go back then. If he was lucky, Emily would ask him to sleep over. She let him do this about twice a week. Not once had Jack asked him about where he went or where he stayed—his only complaint would be if a chore didn't get done, and those complaints were often of the physical variety, so Ben kept up on the chores.

"It's even better as a leftover," she promised. She drank pink wine that she poured from a paper bottle in the fridge. After lunch they did the dishes together. Emily put on some more lipstick and said she was going outside to "feed the cat." The cat would have been more correctly named Marlboro, but she pretended Ben didn't know this.

She made Ben read to her as she sat in her favorite chair, and she fell asleep with a smile on her face. The nap lasted about twenty minutes, at which point Ben heard a car pull in the driveway.

"Another one," he said, gently shaking her by the upper arm. She was softer than anything, anyone he had ever touched. She was magical. Special. He'd seen her know things that no one could even possibly know. It didn't happen all the time, but when it did there was no explaining it. She had a power. "A gift," she called it. But it was more than that. It was a vision, an ability to see ahead, like a dream but real. Magic.

"A gal's got to earn a living," she said, coming out of the chair and stroking the wrinkles out of her clothes. She patted Ben on the head affectionately. "Your reading's getting better," she said. "You might work out after all," she teased. "I might keep you yet."

Ben waited for the car to pull up and the engine to go quiet. Then he slipped out back, prepared to do his job.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

The young kid turned red in the face and corrected himself. “Tea?”

“No, thanks.” Lou Boldt, embarrassed by the offer, felt sorry for the young patrolman. He had been put up to this by someone—probably John LaMoia, who was constantly working the rookies—breaking them in, he called it. Boldt, senior homicide sergeant, was often singled out as the target for such errand running. There was no obligation for a rookie to play the role of a personal servant. Boldt’s tolerance level for LaMoia’s rites of initiation was far above that of Lieutenant Phil Shoswitz, whose nervous disposition and bug eyes resembled a miniature pinscher. If you knew what was good for you, you left Shoswitz in his glassed-in office.

Boldt could think of several ways to turn this stunt back around on LaMoia, but it would mean using this rookie as the go-between, and that seemed manipulative and unfair. “I’m fine,” Boldt told the kid. “Thanks anyway.”

He remembered what it was like to be in uniform and on the fifth floor for the first time: the pounding heart, the prickling skin. Homicide was viewed by most rookies as the top—the pinnacle of a career. Boldt thought back to those feelings and wondered how such myths were started. It was true that homicide dealt with life and death, as opposed to traffic tickets or jaywalkers, but that came with a price of insomnia, guilt, and frustration. Homicide was no cakewalk.

The forty-two-year-old man sitting in the chair today—graying hair cut close to his scalp, his rounding face reflecting the thirty pounds he couldn’t shake, the fingers of his thick hands gnarled from broken knuckles of decades past—was a far cry from the fit, bright-eyed, enthusiastic rookie who had once been tricked into using the chief’s private toilet, a liberty that had cost him two months of walking a beat in the International District.

He could no longer see the Space Needle from the Public Safety Building’s fifth floor. Real estate development in the eighties had taken care of that. It had also choked the roads and interstate highways, crowded the ferries, and sent real estate appraisals soaring right along with the crime rate. Other than that, newcomers were welcome in Seattle, as far as Boldt was concerned.

He was feeling tired. Miles, his three-year-old son, and Sarah, his eight-month-old beauty named after Sarah Vaughan, had taken turns complaining through the night, leaving both him and Liz exhausted and in foul moods. When Liz got tired, Boldt steered clear, if possible, but a morning encounter in the kitchen—which had something to do with the yolk of a soft-boiled egg not being right—had erupted into a tirade about how Boldt was allowing himself to be absorbed by the job again, an unfair charge in his opinion, given that he had beaten her home four of the last five nights. Commercial banking was definitely more time-consuming than police work. He had said something like that to her, which did not score big points, except on the Richter scale. At the moment he was suffering through a dull headache.

He carried that headache with him to the medical examiner’s office in the basement of Harborview Medical Center, where Dr. Ronald Dixon awaited him.

Harborview, perennially under construction, sat atop Pill Hill with a sweeping view of Elliott Bay and the Port Authority’s towering cranes, feeding and unloading the container ships. Parking anywhere near Harborview was impossible. Boldt took one of two open spots reserved for the ME and placed his

OFFICIAL POLICE BUSINESS card on the dash. The September air was in the high 60s. Boldt squinted under the glare of sunshine. A college coed wearing a bikini top sped through the Alder-Broadway intersection on a pair of inline skates. A few of the construction workers stopped to take notice. She wore blue jean shorts with holes in them. To Boldt, she looked too young to be in college.

Dixie's round face looked Asian in certain expressions, his eyes wide-set, his nose flattened by a college intramural football game. There was a look of intelligence in his eyes. One sensed a formidable presence, a busy mind, just looking at the man. He came out from behind his desk and sat at a small conference table, using a jeweler's screwdriver to clean his impeccably clean nails. He grimaced a smile at Boldt and indicated a plastic evidence bag left on the table.

On the wall was a framed poster for a performance of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* by the Seattle Repertory Theater and a black-and-white time exposure showing lightning strikes hitting the Space Needle at night. Boldt always found himself mesmerized by that photo, by the power of nature. There was also a pair of pen-and-inks of western subjects—horses and cabins—that reminded Boldt of Zane Grey.

Boldt examined the contents of the bag, a blackened bone three inches by three inches. Dixie said, "From that fire the other night." Several days had passed since the Dorothy Enwright arson. Until that moment, Boldt had not known which of his squad's cases were involved. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that he had a lot to learn about fires.

"Is this all?" the sergeant asked.

"All that's worth anything," Dixie replied, working the screwdriver under his thumbnail. "It's fairly common in burns for the spine and pelvis to go last. That's a piece of the pelvic bone. Pelvis gives us sex. Spine gives us age. Do you see the calcification on the inside edge?" he asked. Boldt pointed. "Right. That indicates some aging. This wasn't a teenager. Probably wasn't even in her twenties."

"Her?" Boldt inquired, his own spine tingling. He had yet to see any paperwork confirming Witt's mention of an eyewitness.

"What we can tell you is that it was most probably a female. Beyond that, I'm afraid ..." His voice trailed off. "We sifted the site thoroughly. So did Marshal Five and the other inspectors who helped him out. I would have expected to see more than this," he admitted, sensing correctly that it was not what he would have been Boldt's next question. "Fingers, toes, ankles, wrists, they can go pretty quickly." He made a list that sounded like a grocery list. Boldt held a vision of a woman burning to death. He trusted that eyewitnesses would have paperwork or not. "But the femur, the spine, the pelvis ... depending on how she fell, they take awhile to cook, even longer to reduce to ash."

"Time or heat?" Boldt asked.

"The rate of destruction is a product of both."

"This was hot," Boldt informed him. As suggested, he had spoken with air traffic control. The initial spike of flame had stretched eleven hundred feet into the night sky. No house fire had ever caused such a phenomenon. It was the kind of record setting of which Boldt wanted no part.

"We're hoping for some bone frags to come out of the lab work. We sent off a garbage can of ash and debris. Some metals hold up pretty well in fire. We might get something there. Quite honestly, it's unusual to come away with only that." He indicated the contents of the plastic evidence bag. "Highly unusual, one might even say. If an assistant had performed the site work for us, I'd send him or her back to try again. But I did this one myself, Lou. There just wasn't anything to work with." He paused. "You okay?"

"I wouldn't want to die like that."

"No." Dixie added, "You wouldn't like the autopsy either. Toasters and floaters, the two worst

bodies in the business.”

“So I’m working a homicide,” Boldt confirmed.

“‘Circumstances of discovery raise a suspicion that this was a violent death.’ That’s how I’ll write it up. Are there circumstances of disappearance? That’s your bailiwick.”

“There are,” Boldt confirmed. “One Dorothy Elaine Enwright went missing the night of the fire. A eyewitness saw a woman fitting Enwright’s description in the house just prior to the fire.”

“Well, there you are,” Dixie said.

“There I am,” Boldt replied.

The medical examiner’s determination of a body present in the rubble threw the investigation into high gear and even higher profile. Local news agencies clamored for information. Boldt assigned two of his squad’s detectives to the investigation, John LaMoia and Bobbie Gaynes, to be joined by two probationary firemen, Sidney Fidler and Neil Bahan, loaned to the Seattle Police Department as arson investigators. Boldt would act as case supervisor, reporting, as always, directly to Phil Shoswitz.

A coordinating meeting, arranged for the SPD fifth floor conference room, came off on time, scheduled on Monday at 10 A.M., six days after the Enwright fire. It included Boldt’s team and four members of the King County Arson Task Force, an alliance formed of Marshal Five fire inspectors representing various fire districts within the county.

Boldt had never been fond of meetings involving more than three people; to him, they seemed exercises in tongue wagging. But this meeting went differently. The four fire inspectors worked well with their brethren assigned to police duty, Fidler and Bahan. Boldt, LaMoia, and Gaynes participated primarily as onlookers while the technical details of the fire were discussed. A burn pattern on wood known as “alligating” had steered the inspectors toward the center of the structure, where destruction was so severe there was literally no evidence to be gathered. The area of origin—*an* essential starting point for any arson investigation—was therefore impossible to pinpoint.

The longer the meeting went, the more anxious Boldt became. Reading between the spoken words he experienced a sinking feeling that the fire’s intense heat had destroyed any and all indication of its origin. Worse, all six experts seemed both intimidated and surprised by the severity of the heat.

With everyone still present, Neil Bahan summed up the discussion for the sake of Boldt and his detectives. “It goes like this, Sergeant. We have the initial plume reported as a flash. *Not* an explosion. That’s worrisome, because it excludes a hell of a lot of known accelerants. Add to that the eyewitness reports of the height of the plume, and the flame itself being a distinct purple in color, and we figure we’re looking at liquid accelerants. We could make some guesses, but we’re not going to. The prudent thing to do is send our samples off to the state crime lab and test for hydrocarbons. That will point us to the specific fuel used, which in turn may give John and Bobbie a retail or wholesale source to check out.” LaMoia and Gaynes nodded. Gaynes scribbled down a note. “As it is, we’ll put it out to even snitch we got. This guy brags about it—as they love to do—and we nip him. Meanwhile, we go about trying to make sense of the rest of the evidence.”

“Which is?” Boldt questioned.

Bahan eye-checked his buddies and said, “I would rather wait and see what the lab tells us, but the deal is this: We’ve got some popcorn in the foundation’s concrete, some spalling. Fire suppression washed a lot of this evidence away and may have affected the rest of it, but what we *don’t* have is slag or heavy metals—both of which we would expect to see with liquid accelerants. But added to that v

have some blue concrete right beneath the center of the house—quite possibly the area of origin. That's bad shit, blue concrete. That's something we *don't* want to find, because it means this thing went off somewhere above two thousand degrees. If that's right, it lops off another whole shitload of known accelerants and, quite frankly, gets out of our area of expertise."

"ATF, maybe," another of the fire inspectors suggested.

Bahan agreed. "Yeah, maybe we bring in the Feds or send some of the stuff down to Chestnut Grove, their Sacramento lab. See what they have to say."

"So what you're saying," Boldt suggested, "is that the origin of the fire is unusual."

Two of the Marshal Fives laughed aloud.

Bahan said, "You could say that, yes."

"And you're suggesting that we stick by the ruling of suspicious origin."

"Most definitely. This sucker was torched, Sergeant."

"We're checking out her ex-husband, any boyfriends, employer, insurance policies, neighbors," Boldt informed the visitors. "We'll turn up a suspect, and when we do, maybe we send one of your guys into his garage to have a look-see at his workbench?"

"No shortage of volunteers for that assignment," Bahan answered for the others. "This guy is good," he explained. The others nodded.

Boldt bristled at the idea of an arsonist being considered talented. "She was a mom. Did you know a seven-year-old boy?"

"He was in the fire?" one of the fire inspectors gasped, his face draining of color. It wasn't difficult to spot the parents in this group.

"No. Home with his father, thank God," Boldt answered. He imagined his own son Miles in a fire like that. "Thank God," he muttered again.

Bahan said, "We turn it over to the lab and we see what we see. It's really too early to make a decent appraisal. For the time being, it's in the hands of the chemists."

"We'll continue the questioning," Boldt told them. "Maybe something shakes out."

The members of the Arson Task Force nodded, but Boldt's own detective, John LaMoia, did not. He looked impressed. "John?" Boldt asked, wondering if he wanted to contribute.

"Nothing," LaMoia replied.

It wasn't nothing, and Boldt knew it. A feeling of impending dread accompanied him on his return to his office, where a blanket of telephone messages had collected like the falling leaves outside.

"Lieutenant Boldt?" a deep male voice asked at the door, misquoting his rank.

"Enough with the jokes," Boldt complained, assuming LaMoia had put another rookie to work.

It wasn't another rookie he faced. It was one of the four Marshal Fives from the meeting. He didn't remember the name. He was a tall, handsome man with wide shoulders and dark brown eyes. He wore a full beard. He had big teeth. Scandinavian, Boldt decided. The sergeant came out of his chair and corrected his rank. The two shook hands. The other's right hand was hard and callused. He wore his visitor's badge crooked, clipped on hastily. A pager hung at his belt, and his boots were heavy leather. His hair was cut short, his sleeves rolled up. He reintroduced himself as Steven Garman.

"What district are you with?" Boldt asked.

Garman answered, "Battalion Four: Ballard, Greenwood."

"I thought the meeting went well," Boldt said.

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