



NORA ROBERTS

BLUE SMOKE

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Blue Smoke

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Imitation in Death
Divided in Death
Visions in Death
Survivor in Death
Origin in Death

POINT OF ORIGIN

The specific location at which a fire was ignited.

Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.

William Shakespeare

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

Fire became in heat and smoke and light. Like some preternatural beast clawing its way from the womb, it burst to life with a cackle that rose to a roar.

And changed everything in one magnificent instant.

Like that beast, it slithered, snaked its way over wood, and scored what had been clean and bright with its black and powerful fingers.

It had eyes, red and all seeing, and a mind so brilliant, so complete, it memorized everything in its orbit.

He saw it as a kind of entity, a gilded, crimson god that existed only to destroy. And it took what it wanted without remorse, without mercy. With such *ardor*.

Everything fell before it, kneeling supplicants that worshipped even as they were consumed.

But he had made it, created it. So he was the god of fire. More powerful than the flames, more cunning than the heat, more stunning than the smoke.

It hadn't lived until he gave it breath.

Watching it become, he fell in love.

The light flickered over his face, danced in his fascinated eyes. He took a beer, savored its sharp coolness in his throat as his skin streamed with the heat.

There was excitement in his belly, wonder in his mind. Possibilities flashing through his imagination as the fire streaked up the walls.

It was beautiful. It was strong. It was *fun*.

Watching it become, he became. And his destiny was scored into him, branding heart and soul.

BALTIMORE, 1985

Catarina Hale's childhood ended on a steamy August night a few hours after the Orioles demolished the Rangers at Memorial Stadium, kicking their Texas butts—as her dad said—nine to one. Her parents had taken a rare night off to haul the whole family to the game, which made the win all the sweeter. Most nights one of them, often both, put in long hours at Sirico's, the pizzeria they'd taken over from her mother's father. And the place where, eighteen years before, her parents had met. Her mother, a young, vibrant eighteen—so the story went—when the twenty-year-old Gibson Hale had swaggered in for a slice.

Went in for pizza, he liked to say, and got myself an Italian goddess.

Her father talked weird that way, a lot. But Reena liked to hear it.

Got himself a pizzeria, too, ten years later when Poppi and Nuni decided it was time to put the traveling shoes on. Bianca, the youngest of five and their only daughter, took it over with her Gib and none of her brothers wanted the place.

Sirico's had stood in the same spot in Baltimore's Little Italy for over forty-three years. Which was even older than Reena's father, a fact that amazed her. Now her father—who didn't have even a single drop of Italian blood in his whole body—ran the place, along with her mother—who was Italian all the way through to the bone.

Sirico's was almost always busy, and a *lot* of work, but Reena didn't mind, even when she had no help. Her older sister, Isabella, complained because sometimes she had to work there on Saturday nights instead of going out on a date, or with her friends. But Bella complained almost all the time anyway.

She especially complained that their oldest sister, Francesca, had her own bedroom on the third floor while she had to share with Reena. Xander got his own room, too, because he was the only boy, even though he was the youngest.

Sharing with Bella had been okay, it had even been fun until Bella got to be a teenager and decided she was too old to do anything but talk about boys or read fashion magazines or play with her hair.

Reena was eleven and five-sixths. The five-sixths was an essential addition because it meant she had only fourteen months until *she* was a teenager. This was currently her most fervent ambition, overtaking previous ambitions such as becoming a nun or marrying Tom Cruise.

On this hot and heavy August night when Reena was eleven and five-sixths, she awoke in the dark with hard, cramping pains in her belly. She curled up, trying to make herself into a ball and biting her lip to hold back a moan. Across the room, as far as could be managed now that Bella was fourteen and more interested in having big hair than in being a big sister, Bella snored gently.

Reena rubbed at the ache and thought of the hot dogs and popcorn and candy she'd gobbled up at the ball game. Her mother told her she'd be sorry.

Couldn't her mother be wrong, even once?

She tried to offer it up, like the nuns were always saying, so some poor sinner could benefit from her bellyache. But it just hurt!

Maybe it wasn't from the hot dogs. Maybe it was from when Joey Pastorelli hit her in the stomach. He'd gotten in bad trouble for it. For knocking her down and ripping her shirt and calling her a name she didn't understand. Mr. Pastorelli and her father had gotten into a fight when her dad went to hit

house to “discuss the situation.”

~~She'd heard them yelling at each other. Her father never yelled—well, hardly ever yelled. Her mother was the yeller because she was one hundred percent Italian and had a temper.~~

But boy had he yelled at Mr. Pastorelli. And he'd hugged her so hard when he got home.

And they'd gone to the ball game.

Maybe she was being punished for being glad Joey Pastorelli was going to get punished. And being a little glad he'd knocked her down and torn her shirt because then they'd gone to the game and watched the O's stomp all over the Rangers.

Or maybe she had internal injuries.

She knew you could get internal injuries and even *die* because she'd seen it on *Emergency!*, one of her and Xander's favorite shows.

The thought brought on another vicious cramp that had her eyes welling with tears. She started to get out of bed—she wanted her mother—and felt something wet between her thighs.

Sniffing, embarrassed she might have wet her pants like a baby, she crept out of the bedroom and down the hall toward the bathroom. She stepped inside the room with its pink tub and tiles and pulled up her *Ghostbusters* T-shirt.

Hot waves of fear rolled through her as she stared at the blood on her thighs. She was *dying*. Her ears began to ring. When the next cramp seized her belly, she opened her mouth to scream.

And understood.

Not dying, she thought. Not suffering from internal injuries. She had her period. She was having her first period.

Her mother had explained it all, about the eggs, and cycles and about becoming a woman. Both her sisters had periods every month, and so did her mother.

There was Kotex in the cabinet under the sink. Mama had shown her how to use it, and she'd locked herself in one day to practice. She cleaned herself up and tried not to be a sissy about it. It wasn't the blood that bothered her so much, but where it came from was pretty gross.

But she was grown-up now, grown-up enough to take care of what her mama told her was a natural thing, a female thing.

Because she was no longer sleepy, and she was now a woman, she decided to go down to the kitchen and have some ginger ale. It was so hot in the house—dog days, Dad called them. And she had so much to think about now that she'd *become*. She took her glass outside, to sit and sip and think on the white marble steps.

It was quiet enough that she heard the Pastorellis' dog bark in that hard, coughing way he had. And the streetlights were glowing. It made her feel like she was the only one in the world who was awake. For right now, she was the only one in the world who knew what had happened inside her body.

She sipped her drink and thought about what it would be like going back to school next month. How many of the girls had gotten their period over the summer.

She would start to get breasts now. She looked down at her chest and wondered what *that* would be like. What it would feel like. You didn't feel your hair grow, or your fingernails, but maybe you could feel breasts growing.

Weird, but interesting.

If they'd start to grow now, she'd have them by the time she was *finally* a teenager.

She sat on the marble steps, a still flat-chested girl with a tender tummy. Her crop of honey-blond hair going frizzy in the humidity, her long-lidded tawny eyes getting heavy. There was a little mole just above the right corner of her top lip, and braces on her teeth.

On that sultry night the present seemed absolutely safe, the future a misty dream.

She yawned once, blinked sleepily. As she rose to go back in, her gaze swept down the street toward

Sirico's, where it had stood since even before her father was born. At first she thought the flickering light she saw in the big front window was some kind of reflection, and she thought, *Pretty.*

Her lips curved as she continued to study it, then her head cocked in puzzlement. It didn't really look like a reflection, or like someone had forgotten to turn off all the lights at closing.

Curious, she stepped down to the sidewalk, the glass still in her hand.

Too intrigued to consider just how her mother would skin her for walking out alone in the middle of the night, even on her own block, Reena wandered down the sidewalk.

And her heart began to thud when what she saw began to filter through the dreamy sleepiness. Smoke poured out the front door, a door that wasn't closed. The lights she saw were flames.

"Fire." She whispered it first, then screamed it as she ran back to the house and flew through the front door.

She would never forget it, not for all of her life, standing with her family while Sirico's burned. The roar of the fire as it stabbed through broken windows, shot up in quick gold towers, was a constant thrum in her ears. There were sirens screaming, whooshing gusts of water pumping out of the hoses, weeping and shouting. But the sound of the fire, the voice of it, overpowered everything else.

She could feel it inside her belly, the fire, like the cramping. The wonder and horror, the awful beauty of it, pulsed there.

What was it like inside the fire, inside where the firemen went? Hot and dark? Thick and bright? Some of the flames looked like big tongues, lapping out, curling back like they could taste what they burned.

Smoke rolled, pluming out, rising. It stung her eyes, her nose, even as the whirling dance of flames dazzled her eyes. Her feet were still bare, and the asphalt felt like heated coals. But she couldn't stop away, couldn't take her eyes off the spectacle, like some mad and ferocious circus.

Something exploded, and there were more screams in response. Firemen in helmets, faces blackened by the smoke and ash, moved like ghosts in the haze of smoke. Like soldiers, she thought. It sounded like a war movie.

And yet even the water sparkled as it flew through the air.

She wondered what was happening inside. What were the men doing? What was the fire doing? If it was a war, did it hide, then leap out to attack, bright and gold?

Ash floated down like dirty snow. Mesmerized, Reena stepped forward. Her mother caught her by the wrist, drawing her back, hooking an arm around her to bring Reena close against her.

"Stay here," Bianca murmured. "We have to stay together."

She just wanted to *see*. Her mother's heart was an excited drumbeat against her ear. She started to turn her head, to look up, to ask if they could get closer. Just a little closer.

But it wasn't excitement on her mother's face. It wasn't wonder that shone in her eyes, but tears.

She was beautiful; everyone said so. But now her face looked like it had been carved out of something very hard, leaving sharp lines dug deep. The tears and the smoke had reddened her eyes. There was gray ash in her hair.

Beside her, Dad stood with his hand on her shoulder. And to Reena's horror, she saw there were tears in his eyes, too. She could see the fire reflected in the shine of them, as if it had somehow crept inside him.

It wasn't a movie, it was real. Something of theirs, something that had been theirs all of her life was burning away right in front of her. She could look beyond the hypnotic light and movement of the fire now, she could see the black smears on the walls of Sirico's, the grime and wet soot staining the white marble steps, the jagged shards of glass.

Neighbors stood on the street, the sidewalk, most in their nightclothes. Some held children

babies. Some were crying.

She remembered all at once that Pete Tolino and his wife and baby lived in the little apartment above the shop. Something squeezed her heart when she looked up, saw the smoke pouring out of the upper windows.

“Daddy! Daddy! Pete and Theresa.”

“They’re all right.” He lifted her when she pulled away from her mother. Lifted her as he used to when she’d been little. And he pressed his face against her neck. “Everyone’s all right.”

She hid her face against his shoulder, in shame. She hadn’t thought of the people, she hadn’t even thought of all the things—the pictures and the stools, the tablecloths and the big ovens.

She’d only thought of the fire, its brilliance and its roar.

“I’m sorry.” She wept now, with her face buried against her father’s bare shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“Ssh. We’ll fix it.” But his voice was raw, as if he’d drunk the smoke. “I can fix it.”

Comforted, she rested her head on his shoulder, scanned the faces and the fire. She saw her sisters holding each other, and her mother holding Xander.

Old Mr. Falco sat on his steps, his gnarled fingers working a rosary. Mrs. DiSalvo from next door came over to put an arm around her mother’s shoulders. With some relief she saw Pete now, sitting on the curb with his head in his hands, his wife huddled beside him clutching the baby.

Then she saw Joey. He stood, his thumbs hooked in his front pockets, his hip cocked as he stared at the fire. His face was full of something like joy, the kind in the faces of the martyrs on her holy cards.

A something that made Reena hold on tighter to her father.

Then Joey turned his head, looked at her. Grinned.

She whispered, “Daddy,” but a man with a microphone strode up and began asking questions.

She tried to cling when he set her down. Joey was still staring, still grinning, and it was more frightening than the fire. But her father nudged her toward her sisters.

“Fran, take your brother and sisters home now.”

“I want to stay with you.” Reena grabbed at his hands. “I have to stay with you.”

“You need to go home.” He crouched until his red-rimmed eyes were level with hers. “It’s almost out now. It’s almost done. I said I’d fix it, and I will.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Go on home. We’ll be there soon.”

“Catarina.” Her mother drew her back. “Help your sisters make coffee, and some food. For the people who’re helping us. It’s what we can do.”

Food was always something they could do. Pots of coffee, pitchers of cold tea, thick sandwiches. For once there was no arguing in the kitchen between the sisters. Bella wept steadily throughout the process, but Fran didn’t slap at her for it. And when Xander said he’d carry one of the pitchers, no one told him he was too small.

There was a stink in the air now, one she would always remember, and the smoke hung like a dirty curtain. But they set up a folding table on the sidewalk for the coffee, the tea, the sandwiches. Passed out cups and bread to grimy hands.

Some of the neighbors had gone back home, out of the smoke and stink, out of the drifting ash that settled on cars and ground in a thin, dirty snow. There was no brilliant light now, and even from a distance Reena could see the blackened brick, the rivers of wet soot, the gaping holes that had been windows.

The pots of flowers she’d helped her mother plant in the spring to sit on the white steps lay broken and trampled, dead.

Her parents stood in the street outside Sirico’s, their hands locked, her father in the jeans he’d grabbed when she woke him, her mother in the bright red robe she’d gotten for her birthday only last

month.

~~Even when the big trucks drove away, they stood together.~~

One of the men in a fireman's helmet walked over to speak to them, and they spoke for what seemed a long time. Then her parents turned away, still hand in hand, and walked toward home.

The man walked toward the ruin of Sirico's. He switched on a flashlight and went into the dark.

Together, they carried the leftover food and drink back inside. Reena thought they all looked like survivors in those war movies, dirty hair, tired faces. When the food was put away, her mother asked if anyone wanted to sleep.

Bella started to sob again. "How can we sleep? What are we going to do?"

"What comes next. If you don't want to sleep, go clean up. I'll fix breakfast. Go. We'll think better when we're clean and have some food."

Being third in line in age meant Reena was always third in line for the bathroom. She waited until she heard Fran come out and Bella go in. Then she slipped out of her room to knock on her parents' bedroom door.

Her father had washed his hair, and it was still wet. He'd changed into clean jeans and a shirt. His face looked the way it did when he got sick with the flu.

"Your sisters hogging the bathroom?" He smiled a little, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You can use ours this time."

"Where's your brother, Reena?" her mother asked.

"He fell asleep on the floor."

"Oh." She pulled her damp hair back into a band. "That's all right. Go, have your shower. I'll get you clean clothes."

"Why did the fireman go in when the others went away?"

"He's an inspector," her father told her. "He'll try to find out why it happened. They got here faster than they would have if you hadn't seen it. Pete and his family are safe, and that's most important. What were you doing up so late, Reena?"

"I—" She felt the flush heat up the back of her neck as she remembered her period. "I need to just tell Mama."

"I won't be mad."

She stared down at her toes. "Please. It's private."

"Can you go start some sausage, Gib?" Bianca said casually. "I'll be down soon."

"Fine. Fine." He pressed his hands to his eyes. Then he dropped them, looked at Reena again. "I won't be mad," he repeated, and left them alone.

"What is it you can't tell your father? Why would you hurt his feelings at a time like this?"

"I didn't mean . . . I woke up because I—My stomach hurt."

"Are you sick?" Bianca turned, laid a hand on Reena's forehead.

"I started my period."

"Oh. Oh, baby girl." Bianca drew her in, held her hard. Then began to weep.

"Don't cry, Mama."

"Just for a minute. So much, all at once. My little Catarina. So much loss, so much change. My *bambina*." She eased back. "You changed tonight, and because you did, you saved lives. We'll be grateful for what was saved, and we'll deal with what was lost. I'm very proud of you."

She kissed Reena on both cheeks. "Does your tummy still hurt?" When Reena nodded, Bianca kissed her again. "You'll take a shower, then a nice warm bath in my tub. It'll make you feel better. Do you need to ask me anything?"

"I knew what to do."

Her mother smiled, but there was something sad in her eyes. "Then you take your shower, and I'll

help you.”

“Mama, I couldn’t say it in front of Dad.”

“Of course not. That’s all right. This is women’s business.”

Women’s business. The phrase made her feel special, and the warm bath eased the achiness. By the time she got downstairs, the family was in the kitchen, and she could tell by the gentle way her father touched her hair he’d been told the news.

There was a somberness around the table, a kind of exhausted quiet. But at least Bella seemed to have used up all her tears—for the moment.

She saw her father reach over, lay his hand over Mama’s, squeeze it before he began to speak. “We have to wait until we’re told it’s safe. Then we’ll start cleaning up. We don’t know yet how bad the damage is, or how much time it’s going to be before we can open again.”

“We’re going to be poor now.” Bella’s lip trembled. “Everything’s ruined, and we won’t have any money.”

“Have you ever not had a roof over your head, food on your table, clothes on your back?” Bianca asked sharply. “Is this how you behave when there’s trouble? Crying and complaining?”

“She cried the whole time,” Xander pointed out as he played with a piece of toast.

“I didn’t ask you what I can see for myself. Your father and I have worked every day for fifteen years to make Sirico’s a good place, an important place in this neighborhood. And my father and mother worked to build all that for more years than you can know. It hurts. But it’s not the family that’s burned, it’s a place. And we’ll rebuild it.”

“But what will we do?” Bella asked.

“Be quiet, Isabella!” Fran ordered when her sister started to speak.

“I mean, what do we do first?” Bella asked again.

“We have insurance.” Gibson looked down at his plate as if surprised to find food on it. But he picked up his fork, began to eat. “We’ll use it to rebuild or repair or whatever we need to do. We have savings. We won’t be poor,” he added with a stern look at his middle daughter. “But we’ll need to be careful, for as long as it takes. We’re not going to be able to go to the beach like we planned over Labor Day weekend. If the insurance isn’t enough, then we’ll have to go into our savings, or take out a loan.”

“Remember this,” Bianca added. “The people who work for us have no job now, not until we can reopen. Some of them have families. We aren’t the only ones hurt by this.”

“Pete and Theresa and the baby,” Reena said. “They might not have any clothes or furniture or anything. We could give them some.”

“Good, that’s a positive thing. Alexander, eat your eggs,” Bianca added.

“I’d rather have Cocoa Puffs.”

“Well, I’d rather have a mink coat and a diamond tiara. Eat. There’s going to be a lot of work to do. You’ll all do your part.”

“Nobody. Nobody,” Gibson added with a jab of his finger toward Xander, “goes inside until you have permission.”

“Poppi,” Fran murmured. “We have to tell him.”

“It’s too early to call him with news like this.” Bianca pushed food around her plate. “I’ll call him soon, and my brothers.”

“How could it have happened? How can they tell how?” Bella asked.

“I don’t know. It’s their job. Ours is to put it back together.” Gibson lifted his coffee cup. “And we will.”

“The door was open.”

Gibson turned his gaze to Reena. “What?”

“The door, the front door, was open.”

“Are you sure?”

“I saw. I saw the door was open, and the lights—the fire in the window. Maybe Pete forgot to lock it.”

This time it was Bianca’s hand that reached out and covered her husband’s. Before she could speak the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it.” She rose. “I think it’s going to be a very long day. If anyone’s tired, they should try to sleep now.”

“Finish eating,” Gibson ordered. “Take care of the dishes.”

Fran rose as he did, came around the table to put her arms around him. At sixteen she was slim and graceful, with a femininity Reena recognized and envied.

“It’s going to be all right. We’ll make it even better than it was before.”

“That’s my girl. Counting on you. All of you,” he added. “Reena? Come with me a minute.”

As they walked out of the kitchen together, they heard Bella’s irritated, “Saint Francesca.” Gibson merely sighed, then nudged Reena into the TV room. “Um, listen, baby, if you don’t feel well I can spring you from KP.”

A part of her wanted to jump at the chance, but guilt was just a little heavier. “I’m okay.”

“Just say something if you’re . . . not.”

He gave her an absent pat, then wandered off toward the front of the house.

She watched him. He always looked so tall to her, but now his shoulders were bowed. She wanted to do what Fran had done—say the right thing, put her arms around him, but it was too late.

She meant to go right back into the kitchen, to be good. Like Fran. But she heard Pete's voice, and it sounded like he was crying. She heard her father, too, but couldn't understand the words.

So she moved quietly forward toward the living room.

Pete wasn't crying, but he looked like he might, any second. His long hair fell over the sides of his face as he stared down at the hands he clenched in his lap.

He was twenty-one years old—they'd given him a little party at Sirico's, just the family. Because he'd worked there since he was fifteen, he *was* family. And when he'd gotten Theresa pregnant and had to get married, her parents had let them have the upstairs apartment dirt cheap.

She knew *that* because she'd heard Uncle Paul talking about it with her mother. Eavesdropping was something she had to do penance for—a lot. But it always seemed worth a couple extra Hail Marys.

Now she could see her mother sitting beside Pete, her hand on his leg. Her father sat on the coffee table—which they were *never* allowed to do—facing him. She still couldn't quite hear what her father said, his voice was so low, but Pete kept shaking his head.

Then he lifted it, and his eyes glimmered. "I swear, I didn't leave anything on. I've gone over it a thousand times in my head. Every step. God, Gib, I'd tell you if I screwed up. You have to believe me. I'm not covering. Theresa and the baby—if anything had happened to them—"

"Nothing did." Bianca closed her hand over his.

"She was so scared. We were so scared. When the phone rang." He looked at Bianca. "When you called, said there was a fire and to get out, it was like a dream. We just grabbed the baby and ran. I didn't even smell the smoke until you were there, Gib, running up to help us get out."

"Pete, I want you to think carefully. Did you lock up?"

"Sure, I—"

"No." Gib shook his head. "No, don't just knee-jerk it. Go through the steps. Lots of times routines get so automatic, you can skip something without remembering it later. Just go back. Last night, no customers?"

"Ah. God." Pete pushed a hand through his hair. "Jamie Silvio and a girl he's seeing. New one. They split a pepperoni, had a couple of beers. And Carmine, he hung out till closing, trying to talk Toni into going out with him. Um, they left about the same time, about eleven-thirty. Toni and Mike and I finished the cleanup. I did the drawer—oh God, Gib, the bank envelope's still upstairs. I—"

"Don't worry about that now. You and Toni and Mike left together?"

"No, Mike left first. Toni hung out while I finished up. It was about midnight, and she likes if one of us watches while she walks home. We went out—and I remember, I remember hauling out my keys and her saying how cute my key ring is. Theresa had this picture of Rosa made into a key ring. I remember her saying it was sweet while I locked the door. I locked the door, Gib. I swear. You can ask Toni."

"Okay. None of this is your fault. Where are you staying?"

"With my parents."

"You need anything?" Bianca asked. "Diapers for the baby?"

"My mom, she keeps some stuff there for her. I just wanted to come, to tell you. I want to know what I can do. I just went by. You can't get in, they've got it blocked off. But it looks bad. I want to know what I can do. There must be *something* I can do."

"There's going to be plenty to do once we're cleared to get in there and clean up. But right now, you

should go be with your wife, your baby.”

~~“You call me at my mom’s, you need anything. Anytime. You guys have been good to me, to us.”~~ He reached out to hug Gib. “Anything you need.”

Gib walked to the door before turning to Bianca. “I need to go down, take a look.”

Reena dashed into the room. “I want to go with you. I’m going with you.”

Gib opened his mouth, and Reena could see the denial on his face. But Bianca shook her head at him. “Yes, go with your father. When you get back we’ll talk, again, about listening to private conversations. I’ll wait until you get back before I call my parents. Maybe we’ll have more to tell them. Maybe it isn’t as bad as we think.”

It looked worse, at least to Reena’s eye. In the daylight, the black brick, the broken glass, the sodden debris looked horrible, smelled worse. It seemed impossible that fire could have done so much, so fast. She saw the destruction inside through the gaping hole where the big window with its painted pizza had been. The burned mess of what had been the bright orange benches, the old tables, the twisted mess that was once chairs. The sunny yellow paint was gone, as was the big menu sign that had hung in the open kitchen area where her father—and sometimes her mother—tossed dough to entertain customers.

The man with the fireman’s helmet and the flashlight came out carrying a kind of toolbox. He was older than her father; she could tell because there were more lines on his face, and the hair she could see under the helmet was mostly gray.

He’d given them a quick study before stepping out. The man—Gibson Hale—had the long, lank build that rarely went stocky. A little worse for wear with the night he’d put in. He had a lot of curling hair, sandy with some bleached-out tips. Got out in the sun when he could, didn’t wear a hat.

John Minger didn’t just study the fire, but the people involved in it.

The kid was pretty as a picture, even with the hollow, sleep-starved look in her eyes. Her hair was darker than her father’s but had the curl in it. Looked to John as if she was going to get his height and build along with it.

He’d seen them last night when he arrived on scene. The whole family, grouped together at first like shipwreck survivors. The wife, now she was a looker. The sort of bombshell you didn’t see often outside the movie screen. The oldest daughter favored her the most, he recalled. With the middle one missing that wow factor by a fraction. The boy had been handsome, with the sturdy look of childhood still on him.

This kid looked whippy, and there were some bruises and scrapes on the long legs that made him think she probably spent more time running around with her little brother than playing with dolls.

“Mr. Hale. I’m not going to be able to let you go in yet.”

“I wanted to see. Did you . . . could you find out where it started?”

“Actually, I’d like to talk to you about that. Who’s this?” he asked with a smile for Reena.

“My daughter Catarina. I’m sorry, I know you told me your name, but—”

“Minger, Inspector John Minger. You mentioned one of your daughters saw the fire, woke you.”

“I did,” Reena piped up. She knew it was probably a sin to be proud of her status. But maybe it was just a venial sin. “I saw it first.”

“I’d like to talk about that, too.” He glanced over as a police car pulled up to the curb. “Can you give me a minute?” Without waiting for an answer, he went to the car, spoke quietly to the policeman inside. “Is there someplace you’d be comfortable talking?” he asked when he came back.

“We live just up the block.”

“That’s fine. Just another minute.” He went to another car and stripped off what Reena saw no one else would. ~~They were like coveralls. Beneath he wore regular clothes. He put them, and his helmet, in the trunk, along with the toolbox and, after locking it, nodded to the policemen.~~

“What’s in there?” Reena wanted to know. “In the toolbox?”

“All kinds of things. I’ll show you sometime if you want. Mr. Hale? Can I have a second? Could you wait here, Catarina?”

Again, he didn’t wait, simply stepped off a short distance.

“If there’s anything you can tell me,” Gib began.

“We’ll get to that.” He took out a pack of cigarettes, a lighter. He took the first drag as he pushed the lighter back in his pocket. “I need to talk with your daughter. Now your first instinct might be to fill in details for her, prompt her. It’d be better if you didn’t. If you just let the two of us talk through.”

“Okay. Sure. She’s, ah, observant. Reena.”

“Good.” He stepped back to Reena. Her eyes, he noted, were more amber than brown and, despite the bruises under them, looked sharp. “Did you see the fire from your bedroom window?” Minger asked as they walked.

“No. From the steps. I was sitting on the steps of my house.”

“A little past your bedtime, huh?”

She thought about this, about how to answer it without revealing the embarrassing personal details and avoiding a lie. “It was hot, and I woke up because I didn’t feel very good. I got a drink of ginger ale in the kitchen and came out to sit on the steps and drink it.”

“Okay. Maybe you can show me where you were sitting when you saw it.”

She dashed ahead and obediently sat on the white marble steps as close to her original position as she could remember. She stared down the block as the men approached. “It was cooler than upstairs in my room. Heat rises. We learned that in school.”

“That’s right. So.” Minger sat beside her, looked down the block as she did. “You sat here, with your ginger ale, and you saw the fire.”

“I saw the lights. I saw lights on the glass, and I didn’t know what they were. I thought maybe Pete forgot to turn the lights off inside, but it didn’t look like that. It moved.”

“How?”

She lifted a shoulder, felt a little foolish. “Sort of like dancing. It was pretty. I wondered what it was so I got up and walked a little ways.” She bit her lip, looked over at her father. “I know I’m not supposed to.”

“We can talk about that later.”

“I just wanted to see. I’m too nosy for my own good, Grandma Hale says, but I just wanted to know.”

“How far’d you walk down? Can you show me?”

“Okay.”

He got up with her, strolled along beside her, imagined what it would be like to be a kid walking down a dark street on a hot night. Exciting. Forbidden.

“I took my ginger ale, and I drank some while I walked.” She frowned in concentration, trying to remember every step. “I think maybe I stopped here, close to here, because I saw the door was open.”

“What door?”

“The front door of the shop. It was open. I could see it was open, and I thought, first I thought, Holy cow, Pete forgot to lock the door, and Mama’s going to skin him. She does the skinning in our house. But then I saw there was fire, and I saw smoke. I saw it coming out the door. I was scared. And I yelled as loud as I could and ran back home. I ran upstairs and I think I was still yelling because Dad

was already up and pulling on pants, and Mama was grabbing her robe. And everybody was shouting. Fran kept saying, What, what is it? Is it the house? And I said, No, no, it's the shop. That's what we call Sirico's mostly. The shop."

She'd thought this through, John decided. Gone back over it in her head, layered the details.

"Bella started crying. She cries a lot because teenage girls do, but Fran didn't cry so much. Anyway, Dad, he looked out the window, then he told Mama to call Pete—he lives above the shop—and to get him to get out, get his family out. Pete married Theresa and they had a baby in June. He said to tell Pete there was a fire in the shop and to get out right away, then to call the fire department. He was running downstairs when he told her. And he said to call nine-one-one, but she already was."

"That's a good report."

"I remember more. We all ran, but Dad ran the fastest. He ran all the way down. There was more fire. I could see it. And the window broke and it jumped out. The fire. Dad didn't go in the front. I was afraid he would and something would happen to him. He'd get burned up, but he ran to the back steps and up to Pete's."

She paused a moment, pressed her lips together.

"To help them get out," John prompted.

"Because they're more important than the shop. Pete had the baby, and my dad grabbed Theresa's arm and they all ran down the stairs. People were starting to come out of their houses. And everybody was shouting and yelling. I think Dad was going to try to run inside, with the fire, but Mama grabbed him hard and said, Don't, don't. And he didn't. He stood with her and he said, Oh Christ, baby. He calls my mother that sometimes. Then I heard the sirens, and the fire trucks came. The firemen jumped out and hooked up hoses. My dad told them everyone was out, that there was nobody inside. But some of them went inside. I don't know how they could, with the fire and smoke, but they did. They looked like soldiers. Like ghost soldiers."

"Don't miss much, do you?"

"I've got a memory like an elephant."

John flicked a glance up at Gib, grinned. "You got a pistol here, Mr. Hale."

"Gib. It's Gib, and, yeah, I do."

"Okay, Reena, can you tell me what else you saw? Just when you were sitting on the stairs, before you saw the fire. Let's go back and sit and you can try to remember."

Gib glanced toward the shop, then back at John. "It was vandalism, wasn't it?"

"Why do you say that?" John asked.

"The door. The open door. I talked to Pete. He closed last night. I took the family to the ball game."

"Birds trounced the Rangers."

"Yeah." Gib managed a small smile. "Pete closed, along with one of my other kids—employees. He locked up, he remembers specifically because he and Toni—Antonia Vargas—had a conversation about his key ring when they locked up. He's never left a door unlocked. So if it was open, somebody broke in."

"We'll talk about that." He sat with Reena again. "It's a nice spot. Nice place to have a cold drink on a hot night. Do you know what time it was?"

"Um, it was about ten after three. Because I saw the clock in the kitchen when I got the ginger ale."

"Guess most everybody in the neighborhood's asleep that time of night."

"All the houses were dark. The Castos' outside light was on, but they mostly forget to turn it off, and I could see a little bit of light in Mindy Young's bedroom window. She sleeps with a night-light even though she's ten. I heard a dog bark. I think it was the Pastorellis' dog, Fabio, because it sounded like him. He sounded excited, then he stopped."

"Did any cars go by?"

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