

FATAL COMPLICATIONS

Also by John Benedict

Adrenaline

The Edge of Death

FATAL COMPLICATIONS

A Novel

JOHN BENEDICT

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FIRST EDITION

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*To my dearest wife, who has taught me the true meaning
of soulmate*

*Lou Ann, you weave the softness of my dreams
Caress the essence of my mind
Love, from my body to yours, streams
By the fiery stars aligned*

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PROLOGUE

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

The man staggered out of the garage, coughing violently, a dark form cradled in his arms. Smoke was everywhere and flames spewed from the first-floor windows, lighting up the summer night sky. Red-hot embers danced and swirled skyward like millions of drunken fireflies. The sirens were close now. He stumbled toward his wife at the end of the driveway. “I got him,” he rasped. “Poor thing. I found him curled in a ball under the laundry room sink.” The man laid the trembling chocolate Labrador retriever on the cool asphalt and knelt to smooth his fur. “I think he’ll be all right, Marie.”

His wife did not respond—her body was rigid.

The man stood up to comfort her. She remained frozen, her mouth worked, but no words came out. Her eyes were wide with panic. The man whipped his head around. “Where’s David?”

Still no response, but she began to shake. He faced her, hands clamped on her shoulders. “Marie, where is he?” he shouted through smoke-filled lungs. “Where’s David?”

“He went after you to look for Brownie,” she managed to get out before dissolving into sobs. “He moved too fast—I couldn’t stop him.” She pointed in the general direction of the garage, her arm swaying wildly.

He ran back into the garage. The metal door to the house radiated heat. He touched its surface and yanked his hand away; it was much hotter than it had been five minutes ago. He didn’t have time for this safety drill. Ignoring how the knob burnt into the palm of his hand, he twisted it and pushed.

Flames burst out of the doorway, growling like some alien beast. The scorching heat bowled him backwards and he lost his footing and went down hard, hitting his back on his John Deere tractor. The hair on his right forearm was singed off. “David,” he yelled from the cement floor. “Come on out! I got Brownie!” No reply other than the roaring of the fire and the crackling of the wood that used to be the frame of his house.

Scrambling to his feet, he ran back out and around to the front of the house. He heard the fire trucks rumbling up the street, sirens blaring so loud it was hard to think. Flashing red lights played on the trees in the front yard, casting strange shadows, lending a sense of unreality to the scene. The flames were spreading quickly to the second floor.

He approached the front door, knowing that it was locked—Marie was a stickler for these things. He shoved his hand under the thick bristly WELCOME doormat for the key, struck by the absurdity as he unlocked the door and opened it. *Welcome to hell, maybe.*

Again a wall of flame greeted him. This time he was ready; he took two steps back, careful not to fall down. “David!” he yelled. “I have Brownie!”

He paused to listen and thought he heard a faint scream. But from where? He was about to back away when he heard a peculiar, musical sound coming from the living room. Was that David playing the piano? Again, the unreality of the situation washed over him and for a split second he questioned his sanity. Then, just as quickly, he realized the piano wires were twanging randomly as the fire set them free.

He ran around to the back of the house, his feet slipping on the dew-slicked grass, and peered in the kitchen window. The blaze was not as intense here, but smoke was everywhere. He thought he could make out some movement through the smoke. *Please God, protect him. Save my boy.*

He tried the backdoor handle—for once it wasn’t burning hot, but it was locked and he didn’t have the key. He kicked at the door, aiming high, near the lock. Something cracked, but

the door held. Backing up several steps, he ran toward the door and sprang forward, hitting it squarely with both feet. The frame splintered and the door crashed inward. He fell backwards onto the flagstone patio, smacking his right elbow. Smoke billowed out of the ruined doorway, but no flames. He pushed to his feet and started forward.

Someone tackled him from behind, knocking the wind out of him and sending him back to the ground. "I can't let you go in there," a deep voice of authority warned. He rolled over and looked up at a large firefighter standing over him. The air tanks strapped to his back and the face mask below his helmet made him resemble a cross between a spaceman and a sumo wrestler.

Painfully, he sucked air back into his lungs and pleaded hoarsely while climbing to his feet, "My boy's in there!"

Another fireman, smaller than the first, ran over and helped restrain him. The big one said, "Take it easy! If you go in there, you'll never come out alive."

"But my boy..." His voice trailed off into an agonized groan. He strained harder against them.

The firefighter put a hand on his shoulder and fixed him with kind blue eyes. "We have equipment. We'll go in and get him." Blue Eyes turned and shouted, "Bill, bring the hose and gear around back here!"

He stopped struggling. As the arms holding him relaxed their grip, he broke free and ran toward the doorway, ignoring their cries of "Shit!" and "Don't be a fool!"

He ran into the house, his sneakers crunching on broken glass. "David—it's Dad," he called out. "I'm in the kitchen." Coughing spasms prevented him from saying anything else. The black smoke was so thick he couldn't see a thing. Breathing was a nightmare. He dropped to all fours, cutting his hands on the glass. Here he could breathe in little gasps and see his bloodied hands on the vinyl brick flooring.

"I'm coming for you, son," he yelled, his voice already raspy from the smoke. More coughing fits. Again, he thought he could

hear faint cries coming from upstairs, but he couldn't be sure because the roar of the flames was so loud.

He crawled across the foyer to the base of the stairway and began ascending the stairs on all fours. The heat ratcheted up the higher he climbed, and the smoke thickened. Coughs wracked his chest. He wouldn't be able to breathe much longer. If he turned around now, he could probably make it out the way he had come, to the cool, fresh air outside. He groped for the gold cross dangling from his neck and squeezed it hard, saying a quick prayer. Then he heard his boy crying—no imagining this time—a horrible, high-pitched keening that pierced his very soul. He climbed upward.

Halfway up the staircase, he paused and lifted his sweat-soaked t-shirt to cover his mouth and nose. He took several deep breaths through it, then held the last one and clambered to the top of the stairs. Although the smoke made his eyes burn as if someone had poured acid in them, he forced himself to look down the hallway.

What he saw filled him with a sickening dread. Midway along, a hellish inferno blocked the hallway. The heat pouring off the flames was roasting him alive. He put one hand up to shield his eyes, clenched his jaw, and advanced. As he got closer, he noticed that the wall of flame wasn't quite as dense as he had first thought. There was a spot clear of flames at the end of the hallway, near David's room.

His air hunger was becoming unbearable and his surroundings swirled in his dimming vision. He ran toward the flames, but tripped on some unseen debris and went down hard, forcing the last bit of air out of him. Reflexively, he sucked in a lungful of thick, burning smoke, then coughed painfully. His lungs felt like they were being ripped to shreds; soon the bloody remnants would spill out of his mouth. No air was getting in.

The hallway dimmed again. He wasn't going to make it. As his consciousness flickered, he glimpsed his boy through the smoke and flame at the end of the hallway. David was reaching out to him, crying, "Dad, I'm here! Help me!"

CHAPTER ONE

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 3:30 P.M.

“I want you to curl into a ball and arch your back like a mad cat at Halloween,” Dr. Luke Daulton said. “Or a shrimp. Here, look at me.” Luke bent over, demonstrating the proper position so he could administer the spinal anesthetic. He had a healthy respect for large obstetrical patients. Perhaps aversion was a better term, and maybe it wasn’t so healthy.

“But you don’t have a belly like I do,” whined Shirley. She tried to lean forward, but only succeeded in bending her neck—her back remained ramrod straight.

Luke sighed and smiled under his mask. He had forgotten how much he disliked OB anesthesia—taking care of two patients at once was always tricky. He turned and winked at Teri, the anesthesia tech assigned to help him, trying to display more confidence than he felt as he snapped on his sterile gloves.

The delivery room was a busy place and everyone was in close quarters. To his left, two scrub nurses in sterile OR attire counted their surgical instruments, creating quite a racket as they banged them down on the metal trays. Across the room, a neonatologist and neonatal nurse practitioner were readying their pediatric resuscitation equipment. The large radiant warmer above the baby bassinet let out loud screeches intermittently and had to be repeatedly silenced. Two circulating nurses were talking and busily filling out paperwork. Luke could see the obstetrician through a window, scrubbing his hands at the scrub sink.

“That’s Dr. Seidle,” Teri said, nodding toward the window.

She leaned in close and whispered, “He’s pretty cranky for a young guy. Ever since he got sued last year for a bad baby, he’s never been the same. He yells a lot—especially when the shit hits the fan.”

“Great,” Luke said, thinking he knew the type well. He made a mental note to try to keep shit away from the fan today.

Luke searched the faces of the obstetrical team assembled around him, looking for a sympathetic face; he found none. They eyed him curiously, undoubtedly because he was new, but there was no discernible warmth, either. He wouldn’t get the benefit of the doubt around here. Plain and simple: this was a test and he was on trial.

There was also an edgy undercurrent present—a kind of dangerous electricity, a palpable tension. Everyone in the delivery room chuckled and talked nonchalantly, but they all knew that things could go horribly wrong in this place. People could die and careers could be ruined in a matter of minutes.

Luke shook his head to dispel these thoughts. Such negativity—Dad would’ve scolded him, if he were around.

“Teri, can you help Shirley lean forward?” Luke asked.

“Sure, Dr. Daulton.” Teri stepped up on a footstool for better leverage. Luke was happy to have at least one ally in the room.

Shirley attempted to lean forward again, but this time managed to arch her back exactly the opposite way to what he had just demonstrated.

“That’s better,” Luke said with resignation. Time to punt on proper positioning. “Okay, a little bee sting,” he said, the words making him smile as they always did. They brought to mind his medical student days five or six years ago, when an old man told him what large bees they had around these parts. He numbed her skin with a local anesthetic.

“Ouch!” Shirley cried. “Sonuva...”

“That’s the worst part,” Luke soothed. He felt himself relax a little; he had done this procedure countless times. “Try not to move. A little pressure now.” Luke advanced the delicate spinal

needle, roughly the diameter of a human hair, hoping to hit pay dirt—the CSF, or cerebrospinal fluid that bathes the brain and spinal cord. He kept checking as he advanced. No fluid.

“Got it yet?” asked Shirley.

“You’ll be the second to know.”

Teri rolled her eyes at Luke. Even though she had her surgical mask on, Luke could tell she was smiling from the crinkling around her eyes. “Bone?” Teri asked.

“No, it’s a clean shot.”

Finally, Luke had the needle inserted to the hub, three and a half inches in, and still no CSF. “Teri, get me the next one up.” This meant the five-inch needle, “the harpoon.” Luke hated the harpoon because it was long enough to be dangerous. The aorta and the vena cava ran just in front of the spinal column and were easy targets for the big needle.

He checked her landmarks again. They were difficult to palpate, owing to the size of his patient. Teri gave him an encouraging look. The rest of the team stared at him coolly, fidgeting with their instruments or shooting each other glances.

One inch. Two inches. Three. Four. Still no CSF. Luke began to sweat and felt the droplets course down his arms. For the first time, it hit home that there was a real transition to be made here. Two and a half months ago, he was a well-respected, confident senior resident who knew all the ropes at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Now, after taking the job at Swatara Regional Hospital, he had thrust himself into the real world of private practice.

At four and a half inches, Luke struck white gold. Precious CSF dripped from the hub of his needle after he removed the inner stylet. Releasing a big sigh of relief, he turned to wink at Teri again. He attached the syringe and injected the spinal anesthetic agent and quickly withdrew the needle.

“Okay, Shirley, all done. Gonna lay you flat now.” He grasped her shoulders and pulled her down.

“Wow, my feet are getting warm already,” Shirley said.

“Good, good. You did great sitting there. Hope I didn’t hurt you too much.”

“No, it wasn’t bad. I can’t move my feet, though. Is that normal?”

“Perfectly normal,” he said, although he thought it *was* a bit fast. “Time to check your level.” He poked her gently in her groin region with a needle. “Can you feel this?”

“Nope.”

He worked the testing needle up onto her sizable belly. “This?” Still no response.

When he got up to her mid-chest, she said, “Yeah, I can just barely feel that.”

“Great. You’re going to be very comfortable.” Luke felt relief and a certain degree of satisfaction wash over him. He couldn’t wait to tell Kim about it—the two of them loved to exchange work stories.

Teri nudged him and threw a glance at the blood pressure monitor. It read 90/60, down from 145/80 three minutes ago.

Luke reached around to his anesthesia cart and picked up the ephedrine syringe. He injected some into the intravenous port and ensured the IV was running maximally.

“I feel kinda sick,” Shirley moaned.

“I just gave you some medicine to fix that, Shirley,” he said, and patted her gently on her head. “It’ll work in about a minute.”

Dr. Seidle entered the room from the scrub sink, hands held high. “Everything okay?”

“Fine,” Luke said. “Ready to go. I’m Luke Daulton.”

“Mark Seidle. Nice to meet you.” Seidle gave Luke a quick, penetrating stare, then turned to the nurses who were waiting to gown and glove him. “Your wife goes to our practice, doesn’t she?” Seidle asked over his shoulder.

“Yes, Kim sees Rob Gentry; he’s a great guy.”

“Yes, he is.” Seidle stepped up to the OR table. “Where are you from, Daulton?”

“I trained at Penn,” Luke answered, but quickly wondered if this was what he had meant. “I grew up outside Philly—Media, actually.”

“I see,” Seidle said, losing interest in the conversation. He peeked around the drapes to look at his patient and said, “Okay, Shirley, let’s have this baby.”

The BP monitor beeped and displayed its latest reading: 90/60.

Luke scowled briefly at this lack of response to his first dose of ephedrine. He pumped in another 10 milligrams and began to wonder if his spinal was too high, a distinct possibility in an obese patient.

“I think I’m going to—” Shirley let out a loud belch, then showered her pillow with green vomitus.

“You all right up there?” asked Seidle.

“I just yorked all over the place,” Shirley said. “Where’s my husband?”

Luke groaned inwardly, but said, “You can bring him in now.” Having family present in the OR was always a bad idea.

“Okay to start?” Seidle asked, knife in hand, poised to make an incision, not bothering to look up.

“She seems good and numb,” Luke said, “but why don’t you check her.”

Seidle fixed Luke with a hard stare. “I guess we *could* do that.” He smacked the scalpel down and demanded a hemostat. “Shirley, can you feel this?” he asked as he clamped her skin roughly with the large instrument.

Shirley gave him a puzzled look. “Nope, not a thing.”

“Good. Knife.” The scrub nurse handed Seidle the scalpel back.

Luke tensed—he had one more hurdle to clear. There was no such thing as a guaranteed perfect spinal, especially in an obese patient. The spinal block could sometimes range high or low. Luke stared over the drape as Seidle prepared to make the incision. This was the moment of truth. If the spinal was good, Shirley would be unaware of the incision. If not, she would scream.

CHAPTER TWO

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 6:00 P.M.

Bart Hinkle adjusted his cummerbund for the fourth time in what he was beginning to realize was a futile attempt to rein in his gut. He took another swallow of his scotch, ice clinking, and grimaced. His head was pounding and his back ached—he couldn't tell which was worse. Another fundraiser at the Forum in Harrisburg for Senator Pierce's re-election campaign. Another fucking waste of time.

Bart stifled a yawn and surveyed the large banquet hall. Tables were situated all about the room, but few were occupied during the cocktail hour, when everyone stood talking and boozing it up in small groups. Jazz music came from the far end of the room, where a four-man band played somewhere beyond the haze of smoke. The music was decent enough, and some other evening he might have enjoyed it. But tonight he found it loud and tinny. And he felt as if the bass drum was screwed into his skull.

All the city's high rollers were here, decked out in their tuxes and evening gowns—this included representatives from each major law firm. Lots of younger in-crowd women, staffers, and young trophy wives were strutting their stuff. Maybe the night wouldn't be a total waste.

A young hostess in a black French maid getup walked up carrying a silver platter of hors d'oeuvres. "Would you care for some?" she asked in a high, nasal voice.

Bart was famished; he despised the long wait for dinner at these affairs. He grabbed three chicken-wrapped-in-bacon giz-

mos and almost spilled his scotch in the process. “Thank you, my dear,” he mumbled as he ogled the hostess. She was nice and slim and sort of cute, in a rough, slutty way. He took special note of her black fishnet stockings as she walked away. He imagined her wrapping those long legs around him in some nook in the kitchen.

Mimi tugged on his arm and demanded in a screeching voice, “Bart, are you listening to me?” He had almost forgotten that his wife was standing next to him. The way she spewed smoke and alcohol fumes everywhere reminded him of a diesel bus belching exhaust. She waved her hand holding the glowing cigarette after the waitress and almost burned the gentleman standing beside her. “I guess you were too busy drooling over Little Miss Muffet there.” Bart could already detect the slur in her speech—an increasingly common occurrence these days.

Bart took a step backwards. “Mimi, keep it down,” he said in a low voice, lifting both hands in a shushing gesture.

“Keep what down?” she bellowed.

“I mean it, Mimi. Don’t you embarrass me here.” He looked at her closely for the first time that evening and shuddered. Her red lipstick was smudged. And her expensive plaid dress failed to hide a bulging midsection that no amount of liposuction seemed to touch. He made a mental note to withhold the next payment to her plastic surgeon—the joker certainly charged enough money to entitle his clients to results.

Before he and Mimi could escalate things into a full-blown shouting match, Kyle Schmidt, senior partner at Bart’s law firm, approached. He slapped Bart on the shoulder and grabbed his hand, pumping it vigorously. “Bart, you old fox—good to see you!”

“Kyle, glad you could make it.” Bart disengaged his hand from the older man’s crushing grip. Although Kyle was in his late fifties, he was one of those guys who clearly didn’t miss many sessions at the gym. Bart was about to say more when a stunning woman appeared at Kyle’s shoulder. She had long blond hair, and

wore a tight evening gown that displayed an unbelievable amount of cleavage. Bart stared.

“Bart, you’ve met my wife, Bunny,” Kyle said, smiling.

“Of course I have.” Bart held out his hand, using any excuse to continue staring. He vaguely felt Mimi elbowing him. He had met Kyle’s new, thirty-something wife once before, but it had been at some outdoor function and she had had a coat on, for God’s sake. Bart reluctantly dropped her hand and forced himself to turn away from those beautiful breasts toward Kyle.

“Sorry we’re late,” Kyle said. “Bunny and I had some—uh—things to take care of.” He wrapped his arm around Bunny’s slim waist and pulled her tight. He pecked her on the cheek and a syrupy grin spread across his face.

“I’ll bet,” Bart mumbled as Bunny’s pretty face blushed pink and she giggled easily. Bart took another swallow of his scotch.

“Mimi, are you enjoying the gala so far?” Kyle asked, dropping the teenage grin.

“Well,” Mimi said, “the drinks are always watered down at these things. You’d think they could afford better.” She pinched her perpetual look of irritation into one of exasperation. She also belted down her third drink with a fierce determination as if, by God, she’d overcome any silly watered-down effect.

“So Bart, what do you think of our Senator Pierce?” Kyle asked.

“I think he’s got a lock on this election,” Bart said. “They say he’s got the biggest war chest in the history of the state.”

“That’s true. He is, after all, *the* distinguished president pro tem of the Senate. And of course Schmidt, Evans and Knobe contributed heavily to that war chest.” Kyle flashed his bleached-white teeth in another smile.

“Don’t I know it. But why are we even here tonight, Kyle? At a damn fundraiser? Barring some major fuckup, Pierce should win in a landslide.”

“You know how these things work. Election results are never guaranteed. Polls can be dreadfully wrong—remember the New

Hampshire primary? The party doesn't want to take anything for granted."

"I guess so."

"After all," Kyle said, "the Dems have a real chance of taking back control of Congress this year. The stakes could not be higher. The very balance of power in the US Senate might hinge on Pierce's re-election."

"You really think so?" Bart rubbed his temple and considered making another trip to the bar. The first scotch had done squat to erase his headache.

"Of course I do." Kyle studied him for a moment. "What's bugging you, Bart?"

"It's just—I'm not a huge fan of Pierce. I've met him several times. The guy's a first-rate asshole."

Kyle raised his eyebrows and took a sip of his red wine.

"I can't take his goddamn sanctimonious style," Bart said.

"What do you mean?"

"He kills me with all his environmental crap."

"He *does* own the green position and is crushing his Republican opponent, is he not?" Kyle said.

"Yes, he is," Bart admitted. "But Kyle, I'm telling you, Pierce would support child molesters if he thought it would help him get elected."

Kyle chuckled. "Look, maybe you're right, Bart. He is a piece of work, but he does have a knack for reinventing himself. Could it be you're just a bit jealous of his success?"

"Maybe," Bart conceded.

Mimi yawned. "Bunny, let's go to the bar and get you a drink. We can leave these old farts to talk politics." Politics came out powitix.

"Sounds good, Mimi," Bunny said, breaking into a new fit of giggles. The two headed for the bar. Bunny glided across the floor in her high heels, her silky evening gown hugging her figure, the thigh-high slits revealing titillating glimpses. Half the men in the room watched her, undoubtedly hoping she would

lean toward them or, better still, suffer some wardrobe malfunction. Mimi waddled along beside her, looking a little unsteady on her feet.

Bart also followed Bunny's departure with interest. "God almighty, Kyle, you're a lucky man!"

"Bunny, you mean. Yep—she's a real peach. She's teaching me stuff I've never dreamt of." He was all smiles. "How are you and Mimi doing?"

"Funny you should ask," Bart said, shaking his head. "Not so well."

"Is it that bad?"

"Horrible."

"She's a good mother to your son."

"Yeah, if you want an alcoholic for a role model. Perfect for a teenager."

Kyle didn't say anything.

"Listen, Kyle, I need to talk to you."

"So talk."

"Not here." Bart glanced nervously about the room. "Walk with me."

"The wives will be back any minute."

"I know." Bart took Kyle's elbow, almost spilling his wine, and guided him out of the banquet hall and down a deserted hallway, finally stopping at what appeared to be an abandoned cloakroom. The dense carpeting and wainscoting in the corridor seemed to absorb all sound. The air was still and slightly musty, but no longer reeked of smoke.

"What in the world's gotten into you?" Kyle asked. "And why all the cloak and dagger stuff? Is this about the Abercromie account?"

Bart glanced around again and lowered his voice. "No, it has nothing to do with work."

"Okay, good."

Bart took a deep breath, let it out. "Sometimes I wish Mimi were dead."

Kyle laughed and looked relieved. “Yeah, I used to feel the same way about my ex. I don’t think you’re the first one to have such thoughts.”

Bart remained silent.

Kyle’s smile dissolved, leaving behind a look of appraisal. “Bart, we’ve been friends for how long?”

“Twenty years or so, give or take.”

“And in all that time, I don’t remember you ever mentioning such insurmountable marital problems. What’s the big problem?”

“I can’t stand her anymore—she’s revolting. I’m serious about this, Kyle.”

Kyle studied him. “You really are, aren’t you? Listen, just have an affair, for chrissakes. Get it out of your system.”

“Are you kidding? If Mimi found out, she’d take me to the cleaners. She’s got plenty of lawyer friends who’d love to nail my ass.” Bart drained his scotch. “Besides, I’m no good at all that sneaking around stuff.”

“Well, there’s always divorce.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying that after all *you* went through.”

“Okay, you’re right.” Kyle took another sip of his wine. “You’re in a hopeless fuckin’ jam. Welcome to the human race.”

“I’ve been thinking about this for months.”

“And...”

“That’s just it, Kyle. I can’t come up with a plan that’s safe. The news is full of hit men bungling the job or ratting out their employer.”

“Whoa—hold on. Did you say *plan*?”

“Yes.”

“Are you talking about having her *killed*?”

“I know it sounds drastic.”

“Drastic? Are you fuckin’ nuts?” Kyle turned to leave. “I don’t want to hear any more of this crazy talk.”

Bart reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. “Wait, Kyle, I’m serious about taking care of business. I need your help.”

“Don’t be a fool, Bart. You’re way out of your league here—

you'd get caught and spend the rest of your life in jail. These things have to be handled professionally."

"That's the point. I know you *know* people, Kyle."

"Those are just old wives' tales."

"Remember last year when I helped your son beat his cocaine rap?"

"Yeah..."

"And you said if I ever needed anything..."

Kyle looked off into space. Finally he turned and looked Bart squarely in the eye. "I might be able to help you, after all." He set his wine glass down and pulled a business card out of his wallet. "This just might be the professional help you're looking for." He handed the card to Bart.

Bart took the card gingerly, rubbing it gently between his thumb and index finger, as if searching the paper for clues. The card was blank except for a handwritten phone number: 566-3031. "Thanks, Kyle." Bart tucked the card into his wallet and for the first time that evening forgot about his headache.