

RED FLAG WARNING

A new novel about a serial arsonist in Los Angeles
Available late 2009

Chapter 1

NiteHeat entered the empty sanctuary, walked to the thirteenth row and sat on the aisle. The church had the same oppressive sweet smell and the dark red material on the pews was unchanged. Father Ott was long gone, but the morning sun illuminated the Apostles' Creed Window just as it had 20 years ago.

NiteHeat thought back to a perfect Christmas day in 1987. When they arrived Mom and Dad wanted to sit in back, but NiteHeat pulled them up to the special place, the lucky thirteenth row. From that spot, NiteHeat saw only the blood red and deep orange stained glass windows on the walls. Sitting further back ruined everything, the green and blue windows intruded. In the lucky thirteenth, just the pure colors of fire were visible.

Behind the pulpit, stained glass covered the front wall. It was the Apostles' Creed Window, but the seven flames were the only part that mattered. Mom said they represented the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, but NiteHeat thought they looked like an inferno in a city - three big flames towering over the tops of buildings, consuming them, bringing them down, and four smaller flames at the bottom, licking at the foundations, burning up from hell.

Everything had been perfect on that Christmas day. Father Ott and the choir wore cardinal red robes and the congregation sang *Hymn 74, "A stable lamp is lighted, whose glow shall wake the*

sky." The sanctuary was ablaze. The Eternal Light hung in the corner of the altar, a singular flame never to be extinguished.

Worshipping God meant worshipping fire. Didn't God sometimes appear as a burning bush? Father Ott wanted the parishioners to be "on fire for Jesus," and NiteHeat knew exactly what that meant. Fire was God's divine tool and the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra with fire and brimstone proved it.

Soon it would be 1988. NiteHeat liked the numbers. Add them and divide by two. Thirteen. Perfect. The old year would pass into the rubbish bin and with it the memory of the fire in the toilet next to the upstairs vestry. It was just paper towels burning in the trashcan, but half the congregation had come up to look at it. If anyone had asked about it, NiteHeat would have denied everything, but no one ever asked. It was such fun to see all those people wondering how that fire started.

After the service, they went home for Christmas supper. While everyone was busy, NiteHeat slipped outside through the garage, stopping to get the spray bottle filled with paint thinner and the matches hidden behind a pile of magazines. These were not the Ohio Blue Tips used for more important occasions, wrapped in plastic and hidden deep in the darkness and dust. Today the Diamond strike on the box matches were good enough, manufactured in India with a legend that warned, "KEEP AWAY FROM CHILDREN." They were common and could be stolen from any grocery store.

Scorched sand surrounded the ants' nest behind the garage. Soon another colony would be needed - this one had been decimated

by the continual onslaught of flames. When NiteHeat dug into the nest with a stick, a few angry ants erupted into the sunlight. They ran in tight circles and then spread out over the sand. A fine mist rained down from the spray of the paint thinner. Pouring directly from the metal can didn't do the job. A plastic spray bottle was so much better. NiteHeat held the match carefully, not too close to the tip, but not too far away. If the head of the match broke off, it would ruin everything and the burning could not take place. NiteHeat hoped that wouldn't happen. The ants must burn today, on Christmas. The match scraped across the side of the box, the tip sputtered, giving off smoke, the flame struggled and became a beautiful orange triangle. A perfect light. *They would burn today.*

The match fell into the center of the moist sand and fire leapt up, smothering the ants. They looked like frantic little people, trying to escape the heat, but it was impossible. One by one, they were overcome. Each ant curled up, burst into a tiny puff of flame, and turned to ash. Sometimes NiteHeat caught a slow moving lizard and tossed it into the flames, but today all the lizards were home with their families for Christmas, or maybe on fire watch.

The California sun was warm on that Christmas day. NiteHeat stripped and stepped closer to the low flames, stood motionless, not breathing, feeling the radiant heat of fire on bare skin. NiteHeat was the only person on the planet. It was perfect.

NiteHeat could have remained in the sanctuary all day recalling these memories of childhood, but there were too many important things to do. It was early September and Red Flag Warnings would soon announce the Santa Ana winds that sweep through Southern California. The fire season was drawing near and final preparations were necessary. The latest device had to be perfected. NiteHeat had to check the Internet for reports about new arson detection methods. Setting a high bar for the investigators was important. A last look at the flames on the Apostle's Creed Window, and it was time to go.

On the freeway, NiteHeat heard a news report that an al-Qaida terrorist in a detention camp had talked of a plot to set a series of devastating forest fires in the western United States. It wasn't a bad idea and Southern California would be the place to start. It would be so perfect. It never rains, the humidity is low, and the hills are covered with dry brush and vegetation, some of which hadn't burned in 50 years, but NiteHeat thought the terrorists should stick to what they know. What a joke - imagine them out in the wilderness of the Los Padres Forest trying to start a major burn. They wouldn't have a clue. A few would set their robes on fire. Some would get lost and starve. Others would fall off cliffs, stumble into ravines, or slide down mountainsides. Some would be hit by lightning, and at least one would be eaten by a mountain lion. The survivors would stagger home, regroup, and enroll in a local fire academy.

Arson is not for towel-heads. Fire comes from *my* God, NiteHeat thought, not from Allah. Fire is sacred and Southern California

is the holy land, the place where fire reigns. It scours the landscape and annihilates everything in its path. It cauterizes and sterilizes, it purifies and wipes away the scum, but it is not for towel-heads to dispense. While they studied Fire Science 101, NiteHeat would be the one to deliver the flames to a deserving population.