

RED FLAG WARNING – A NOVEL ABOUT SERIAL ARSON BY KURT KAMM

PROLOGUE

Ohio Blue Tips

It was a perfect Christmas day. He didn't wet his bed the night before, and Mom was in a good mood. They arrived at church early. Mom wanted to sit right up front, but he pulled her back. They sat in his favorite place, the lucky thirteenth pew, to the right of the aisle. The left side was okay, but the right side was *the* spot. From the lucky thirteenth, he saw the blood red and deep orange stained glass windows in his peripheral vision. A late arrival meant sitting further back, and that didn't work - the green and blue windows screwed up everything. In the lucky thirteenth, those colors were behind him, and the pure colors of fire ruled.

The Eternal Light hung in the corner, a singular flame never extinguished. Behind the pulpit, stained glass covered the back wall. It was the Apostles' Creed Window, but all he saw were the seven flames. Mom said they represented the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, but he thought they looked like a blaze in a city – three big flames over the tops of buildings, consuming them, bringing them down; and the four smaller flames at the bottom, licking out of the foundations, burning up from hell.

Christmas was special because Pastor 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...*" Today the sanctuary was ablaze. He looked down. His hands rested on his thighs, palms down, fingers together, each hand the same distance from the knee. The buttons on his shirt made a straight line to the center of his belt buckle.

Soon it would be 1988. He 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 men's toilet next to the upstairs vestry. It was just paper towels burning in the trashcan, but half the congregation stood looking at it. If anyone had asked him about it, he would have denied everything, but no one ever asked. It was a real buzz to see all those people wondering how that fire started.

Afterward, they went home for Christmas supper. He had time to slip outside through the garage, stopping to get the spray bottle filled with Skinner's Paint Thinner and the box of matches he kept

hidden behind a pile of magazines. These were not the Ohio Blue Tips, wrapped in plastic and hidden deeper in the dust and gloom. He saved the Ohio's for more important purposes. Today he would use the Diamond "strike on the box" matches, manufactured in India and available in every grocery store in a box that warned, "KEEP AWAY FROM CHILDREN."

Scorched sand surrounded the ants' nest behind the garage. Soon he would have to find another colony, this one decimated by the continual onslaught of flames. He dug into the sand with a stick and a few angry ants erupted into the sunlight. He stirred the earth again and watched as they ran in tight circles and then spread out over the sand. He sprayed the paint thinner; a fine mist rained down. Pouring from a metal can didn't work - a plastic spray bottle was so much better. He would have to find more ants, and buy more thinner.

He held the match in his right hand, 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. He hoped that would not happen – the ants must burn today. He scraped the match across the side of the box; the tip sputtered and gave off black smoke. The flame struggled and became a beautiful pastel orange triangle. A perfect light – they *would* burn today. He dropped the match into the center of the moist sand. Fire leapt up engulfing the ants. He watched their frantic movements until they curled up, smoldered and turned to ash – like little people. Sometimes he caught a slow moving lizard and threw it into the flames. Today all the lizards were home with their families for Christmas or maybe on fire watch.

The California sun was warm on his shoulders. He unbuckled his pants and let them fall to his ankles. He pulled down his underpants and stepped closer to the low flames. He held his breath and stood motionless. He was the only human on the planet. The warmth crept up his legs.