

Chapter 26

On Wednesday morning, NiteHeat bumped along the hard ground to a parking spot under the vast cement structure that supported the overpass. This concrete spot in the middle of the Los Padres National Forest was the perfect laboratory. One wall, thirty feet high, was scorched from the flares directed against it on earlier visits.

The sound of cars and trucks overhead created a high-pitched whine. The air smelled of piss. On the last visit, two homeless men living here under Interstate 5 appeared. They wanted money, or food, or something. They were filthy, with matted hair and ragged clothes, and they wouldn't go away. Finally, a burning highway flare waved in their faces was enough to scare them off into the brush, leaving behind a pile of yellow newspapers, empty food cans and plastic bottles. Charred items from their fires were mixed in with the burnt soil from the flare trials.

Stepping into the cool shade of the concrete cavern, crimson and tangerine flames danced in NiteHeat's mind. A mountainside burned, homes were consumed, and fire crews battled an inferno. A wildland fire was needed – a raging, wind driven blaze with towering flames started by a device. The arson investigators call them “incendiary devices,” but NiteHeat preferred the term “ignition device,” it sounded more scientific. Place one on the ground in the right spot and it would remain intact. Set it up so a strong Santa Ana wind blows the flames away from the device, leaving it naked and vulnerable to searching eyes.

NiteHeat had learned so much and come so far from the simple days of burning ants behind the garage. The Internet made anything possible. There was even a website which sold the old Ohio Blue Tip matches. At one point, the Internet led to explosives, safety fuses, and blasting caps attached to detonating cords. Someday NiteHeat would create an explosion. Imagine the results of a Nitro Trencher or a Tetrytol Demolition Block going off in the brush! Better yet, why not just use Semtex H, and take out half a forest? That would be a real kick, but it would have to wait. Right now, NiteHeat was intent on a wildfire.

This spot under the I-5 was the perfect place to assemble the device and make sure it functioned. Constructing it was almost as much fun as starting a fire. Almost. This signature, this new device, would start so many fires it would become a legend.

NiteHeat took out the backpack and a small tool bag with electrical tape, wire clippers, a knife, pliers, and other tools. Wires couldn't be soldered out here, but tape would do. No more red apple timer, not after the Bailey Canyon fiasco. A cooking timer in the shape of a chicken would start the next fire. Today was the day to test it once more. Wait until the Arson Unit found a chicken timer! What a joke. What would they think of that?

The flare was chosen carefully. The basic roadside safety flare produced a short flame and was too common. It did a decent job at Porter Ranch, but not good enough. The Forest Service backfire torches burned for 10 minutes and could be inter-connected. NiteHeat liked the backfire torches a lot, but anyone could buy them and they showed no imagination. Besides, after Sierra Madre, something new was needed. An aircraft parachute flare was impractical. The flare itself was a masterpiece of magnesium and sodium nitrate, which created a white-hot flame that consumed the aluminum container after ignition. But it was heavy and the force of the opening parachute was required to trigger it. It was too complicated and there was beauty in simplicity. NiteHeat tested the Skyblazer Red Meteor, a rescue flare that burned at 17,000 candlepower but the burn period wasn't long enough. A military surplus distress signal flare that burned for 45 seconds at 30,000-candle power was the answer.

NiteHeat removed the flare and the rest of the components from the backpack. The timer was a beauty - a colorful plastic chicken. The head twisted around and the beak pointed to the number of minutes. It was purchased last Christmas at a Williams Sonoma in Thousand Oaks. In the middle of the winter heat in Southern California, the whole shopping center was decorated with Christmas lights and giant snowflakes hanging from palm trees.

Kneeling on the soil, NiteHeat checked the hook-up one more time. One wire ran from the battery directly to the striker head of the flare. The second strand ran from the battery to the head of the flare through the timer. The two wires were joined together across the head of the flare by a thinner gauge wire. When the timer reached zero, it closed the circuit and voltage flowed through the loop. The electricity

overloaded the thin wire, causing it to turn red-hot, igniting the flare. It worked perfectly twice before. The battery was an Optima 6-Volt, manufactured to military specs. It was oxide red and highly reliable, better than the Energizer or Eveready versions. The ring of paper matches taped around the head of the flare weren't necessary, because the hot wire from the battery would be enough to ignite the flare, but it was a fail-safe mechanism. Tomato red tape secured the matches. It clashed with the color of the battery, but it was the only red tape to be found. It would be the first thing to burn and no one would ever see it.

NiteHeat positioned the chicken timer on the ground so it wouldn't be destroyed when the matches and flare ignited, set it for two minutes and stepped back, barely breathing, watching the chicken beak move toward zero. A kaleidoscope of images appeared – burning ants behind the garage – tossing a small jar of gasoline stuffed with a burning cloth into a dumpster - setting fire to a stray dog and watching it run down the street. Naked bodies paraded past while NiteHeat held matches close to bare skin.

The chicken timer gave a short ring, closed the circuit, and the copper wire became red hot. The matches burst into flame and the fuse of the flare caught fire.

"We have ignition!"

That was NASA's launch signal. Shuttle lift-offs on television were intoxicating, just to hear the deep-voiced announcement from Mission Control and see the flames from the booster rockets.

The distress flare jacked-off, spewing fire in a bright two foot-long flame on the ground. NiteHeat moved closer and inhaled the smoke, hypnotized by the intense glow, standing motionless, heartbeat echoing, feeling the orgasm.

Perfect.

Scuffing around in the dirt had created a layer of dust on NiteHeat's White Smoke Jumpers. After wiping away the dirt and restoring the beautiful black sheen to the wildland boots, it was time to go. NiteHeat felt relaxed, fulfilled. For a while, the tension would ease. Driving back along the dirt road to the freeway, NiteHeat thought of the story about setting rats on fire and letting them run off into the brush. What was the candlepower of a rat on fire, and how long would it burn?