

Red Flag Warning

A Serial Arsonist Mystery

Kurt Kamm

Chapter 1

NiteHeat entered the empty sanctuary, walked to the thirteenth row and sat on the aisle. The church had the familiar 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 15 years ago.

NiteHeat thought back to the Christmas day in 1992. When they arrived, Mom wanted to sit in back, but there was a special place, the lucky thirteenth row. From that spot, NiteHeat could see the blood red and deep orange stained glass windows in the walls, the pure colors of fire.

In front, behind the altar, was the Apostles' Creed Window. Mom said the seven flames represented the 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.

On that perfect Christmas day, 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. Father Ott wanted his parishioners to be "on fire for Jesus." NiteHeat knew exactly what that meant. Fire was God's divine tool and the story of the burning bush and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone proved it. God delivered fire on the wings of angels.

After the service, they went home for Christmas supper. While everyone else was busy, there was time to slip into the garage to get the spray bottle filled with paint thinner and the matches hidden behind a pile of old magazines. They were Diamond strikes stolen from the grocery store down the street. On the box was a warning: "*KEEP AWAY FROM CHILDREN.*"

Outside, NiteHeat dug into the scorched sand surrounding the ants' nest with a stick. A few angry ants erupted into the sunlight. They ran in tight circles and then spread out over the sand. NiteHeat misted them with a spray of paint thinner. Holding the match carefully, scraping it across the side of the box, the tip sputtered and gave off smoke. The flame struggled and became a beautiful orange triangle.

NiteHeat threw the match 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. One by one, they were overcome. Each ant curled up, burst into a tiny puff of flame, and turned to ash.

The California sun was warm. It was time to strip and step closer to the low flames and stand motionless, the only person on the planet, feeling the radiant heat from the fire on bare skin, touching the secret place. It was perfect.

NiteHeat could have stayed in the sanctuary forever recalling that day, but there were too many important things to do. The fire season was drawing near and the device had to be perfected. It was early September and Red Flag Warnings would soon announce the Santa Ana's, the "Devil Winds," which move in from the east and which flow down into the Los Angeles Basin through gaps in the mountains. Compressing and warming as they descend, they arrive hot and dry and with gale force.

A last look at the flames on the Apostle's Creed Window, and it was time to go. On the freeway, NiteHeat looked at hills covered with dry brush and vegetation, some of which hadn't burned in 50 years. Southern California was the holy land of fire.

NiteHeat would be the angel who delivered the flames.

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