bePUZZLED
A Mystery Jigsaw Thriller With a Secret Puzzle Image

BURNING EVIDENCE

Story By JOHN LUTZ
The fire was like a sunset at midnight on the skyline of Metro City. Chief Fire Marshall Frank Novacheck, just back from vacation in Colorado, had picked up the call on his scanner and driven to the scene immediately. The six-story apartment building was blazing by the time he and the firefighting equipment arrived. Novacheck, a short, graying man with a deep chest and powerful shoulders, was the city’s top arson investigator. He stood chewing on his dead cigar and watched from beneath craggy gray brows as the building burned. The crowd of spectators had edged up behind him, pressing him near a hastily put up police cordon. Beside him, a man in his twenties wearing a white shirt and tie, his curly dark hair tumbling down over his forehead, was talking into a small recorder. He held the recorder close to his mouth and spoke loudly and distinctly to overcome the considerable background noise. Novacheck thought he recognized the man as a journalist, though he wasn’t sure which newspaper or TV station the man worked for. Novacheck stood and listened as the man described the fire.

“Equipment is all over the street. Aerial trucks have raised hydraulic ladders to the upper floors, and tenants are scrambling down them, often aided by firefighters. Other ladders support firefighters directing streams of water into the upper windows of the building, from which ominous clouds of black smoke belch and rise to become part of the night sky, blotting out the stars. Water is running a foot deep in the street as soot-darkened men and women slosh through it in their turnout boots, with fire helmets strapped firmly to their heads. Sirens of departing ambulances, and of more arriving equipment, sear through the night as police keep spectators safely away from the flames and the brick walls buckling from intense heat.”

Grim as the scene was, Novacheck had to smile. He liked that “sear through the night” description of the sirens. Within a few hours the building was a blackened hulk, and the west wall had collapsed inward.

A tall man with weary eyes staring from his soot-black face approached Novacheck. It was Captain Eugene Earl of Engine Company 20. He was wearing turnout gear and obviously had been in the thick of the fire; Novacheck wouldn’t have recognized him if it hadn’t been for the gold captain’s badge. “Fourth big one this month,” he said to Novacheck.

Novacheck was surprised. “Really? I didn’t know. I just got back from a month’s vacation.”

“You’ll get the call on this firebug,” Earl said. “Pressure at the very top, working on down.”

“So the police think all four fires are the work of the same arsonist?”

Earl nodded. “I think so, too. There are facts the public doesn’t know yet.” Earl had a brother high in city government. Information like that from him was always accurate.

“Thanks, Captain,” Novacheck told him. He gazed at the still smoldering building.

“How many casualties?”

“Looks like three tenants dead, five injured. One of the dead is fireman Randy Hagler of Truck 225, who lived in one of the apartments. The Tactical Rescue Squad saved his wife and kid after their ceiling collapsed. Nobody else hurt bad in the department. We were lucky this time.”
“You were good,” Novachek said. “You’ll be good again if there’s a next time.”
“There’ll be a next time,” Earl said, as he strode toward a firefighter playing a stream of water over glowing embers.

Novachek didn’t answer, but he knew in his gut that the captain was right.
As he returned to where his car was parked, he noticed the young journalist on the corner, still talking into his recorder.

It was the mayor himself who summoned Novachek the next morning. Mayor Dan Weeklie was a big man with a stomach paunch that preceded him like the prow of a proud ship. He entered his office, where Novachek sat waiting, and gave Novachek the broad, warm smile he’d used in his recent campaign. Novachek knew the man had a dark side, a quick temper, and a talent for finding someone else to shoulder the blame when things went wrong. An uneasy sensation at the nape of Novachek’s neck told him that this time he was the one being set up to take whatever credit the mayor chose to spread around—or all of the blame.

“You’re the best we’ve got, Frank,” Mayor Weeklie said. “That’s why I’m putting you in charge of catching the Dante arsonist.”

“Dante?”
“That’s what he calls himself—after Dante’s Infemo, we assume.”
“Is that what the news reporters are calling him?”
“Yes, but there’s a lot about those four big fires that hasn’t been mentioned in the news, Frank. And there’s a Metro City Dispatch reporter named Harrison who’s chomping at the bit to put it in his paper. So far he’s cooperated with the authorities, but we can’t stop him if he and the paper decide to reveal everything the arsonist has told Harrison.”

“Wait a minute! The arsonist has been in touch with this guy?”
“Talks to him on the phone. Sends him clues, too. Taunts him and the police. You’ve been out of touch fishing on some trout stream the past month, Frank. Jones of your department determined these were incendiary fires, started with an accelerant, and Williams of the police arson squad has been on the case. Now that you’re back, I’ve issued orders for you to take over the investigation.” Again the wide, friendly smile. “It’s time for our big gun. See Jones and Williams and get the file on the case. Then you better talk to Harrison.”

“It’s the job of the police or Arson Task Force agents to track down an arsonist once it’s been determined a fire’s been set,” Novachek reminded the mayor.

“And so it will be this time, officially. But we both know that somebody with your rare instinct for understanding fires has the best chance to figure this thing out. Of course, you and the police will share information.”

It sounded to Novachek like a potentially volatile situation. “Are you sure those four fires are connected?”

“You don’t know about the deaths?”

Novachek’s expression must have told the mayor that he had no information on any deaths other than last night’s.
“The four fires were at firefighters’ residences and resulted in the deaths of all four, as well as members of their families.”

Novacheck sat back and digested that information.

“That’s how it is, Frank. Must mean something, but we’re not sure what it is.”

Novacheck was going to ask more questions, but Mayor Weeklie said, “I’ve got a meeting with the governor in half an hour, Frank. Let me know if you need anything.” And he strode heavily out the door that was suddenly opened for him by an aide.

Jones turned over the department file to Novacheck, who didn’t have time to study it before examining the ruins of the previous night’s fire. He found the point of origin easily enough—a pile of wood and what looked like the remnants of burned cloth, in the apartment building’s basement. The wood was alligatored — flaked and patterned — from a central point in such a way that there was no doubt the fire had been set. An accelerant had been poured over the wood and cloth, then ignited with a match or cigarette lighter.

Though the building was air conditioned, the windows on each landing of the rear stairs were open, those on the lower floors only a few inches, the windows on the fifth and sixth floors flung open wide. The stairwell had acted like a chimney, rapidly drawing the flames to the upper floors. Novacheck probed through the debris and found that a second fire had been set beneath the front stairwell in similar fashion. This was an arsonist who understood how fire raced through a building. Only smoke alarms and a sprinkler system had prevented more deaths and injuries.

He got into his department car and drove to a meeting he’d arranged with the police lieutenant, Jack Williams, and the reporter, Roy Harrison.

Williams was a large, beefy man with a mottled complexion and fierce blue eyes. He made no secret of the fact that he didn’t like his authority usurped. Harrison turned out to be the young man Novacheck had seen speaking into a recorder the night of the fire.

“Don’t you ever light that cigar?” Williams asked irritably.

“Haven’t in years,” Novacheck said. “Doctor’s orders.”

“The deal is,” Williams told both of them, “the police get all information. We don’t want any amateurs muddying the waters.”

“You know everything I know,” Harrison told him.


But it soon became apparent to Novacheck that Harrison was the recipient of most available information about the arsonist. He had a sampling of the items that had been sent to him at the newspaper, the arsonist had also phoned him twice.

“What did he sound like?” Novacheck asked.

“Kind of eerie, but he was disguising his voice.”

“A male voice?”

“I think so.”

“We’ve been through this,” Williams said.

“I haven’t,” Novacheck told him. He looked at Harrison, then at the cardboard box at the young man’s feet. “Show and tell time,” he said.

Harrison opened the box. It contained, among other things, newspaper clippings about
the fires along with the crudely printed message “There will be more. Dante.” Novachek examined the clippings. They were cut neatly from the newspaper with a razor blade or scissors. The dates were carefully included. The first fire had been set July first, the second on the fifth, the third on the tenth. Last night had been the fifteenth.

“Obviously,” Novachek said, “we can expect another fire on the twentieth.”

“We figured that much out,” Williams said.

Harrison grinned.

“A lot of arsonists work in a pattern,” Novachek said. “That this one apparently does too, should be of some help to us.”

“Anything else you can tell about him?” Harrison asked. “Not for public consumption at this time, of course.”

“He wants to be caught.”

Harrison looked surprised, but Williams knew what Novachek meant.

“That’s why he’s sending you clues,” Novachek said. “Why he’s taunting the police. He’s carrying guilt. He hates what he’s doing, but he can’t help himself. One side of him wants to keep setting fires, another side desperately wants someone to stop him. That’s the side that has established a relationship with you.”

“The city’s already in an uproar about this,” Williams said. “If everything this nut told or sent to Harrison came out, every citizen would be phoning the department demanding action.”

“I can keep a lid on this only so long,” Harrison said. “My editor already wants to take it all to press. The only thing stopping him is that I’m in a position to get the story before anyone else when Dante is finally caught.” He glanced from Williams to Novachek. “You two guys owe me that much, right?”

“Right,” Novachek agreed. “The scoop will be yours. You have a privileged position.”

“Temporarily,” Williams added.

Harrison grinned and shrugged. “Everything in the world is temporary. The guys on the fire department are realizing that in a major way. They don’t know why Dante’s setting the fires, so they don’t know who’s next. Nobody in the city’s knows who’s next, so everyone’s afraid.”

“What’s this all about?” Novachek asked, pulling from the box a magazine photo of a beautiful, diamond-adorned woman emerging from a limousine, clutching a bouquet of roses and showing plenty of leg.

“Don’t you recognize her?” Harrison asked. “That’s Loreen Demore. She was nominated for an Oscar last year for best actress. Right now she’s playing the lead in Roses for a Dead Man on Broadway.”

“I haven’t seen a play or movie in years,” Novachek said, wondering what an actress could have to do with an arsonist.

Williams stood up and tucked in his shirt. “Unless we’ve got more business, I need to get back to the station.”

“That’s it for now,” Novachek said. Then to Harrison, “I’ll keep the box of goodies to look over later.”
“Sure,” Harrison said. “The press is your friend, Frank.”

Just like that, they were on a first-name basis. Novachek smiled and slid the box over close to him.

“We were sent duplicates of some of those items,” Williams said.

“Dante wants to make sure everybody knows he’s smart enough to get by with jerking the strings of the law as well as the news media.”

“So far,” Harrison said, “he’s been that smart.” He stood up and handed Novachek a white business card. “Call me at that number if you have any questions,” he said. “Or any information for me.”

“That works both ways,” Novachek said, accepting the card.

Novachek spent most of the afternoon poring over the files on the four fires, and the clues that had been sent to Harrison.

The four firefighters who had been killed were stationed at four different firehouses. Novachek looked for a meaningful pattern but could find none. One of the men had been single, the other three married. Last night’s victim, Hagler, was the only one who’d lived in an apartment. The wives of the other two married victims had died in the skillfully set fires. Hagler’s apartment had been a first-floor unit directly above the fire set in the rear stairwell. Novachek suspected the cloth, which the lab said had been rubber-backed, was used not just for added fuel, but because it would produce the life-snuffing smoke that quickly claimed victims in their sleep.

He was reaching into the box to examine clues sent to Harrison, when the phone rang.

Harrison identified himself in a breathless voice, then said, “I’m a guest on a radio talk show on station WFUZ, Frank. Dante’s on one of the lines, waiting to talk to me.”

The receiver clicked in Novachek’s ear.

He leapt to his feet and crossed the room to the stereo setup on a shelf near the window, switched on the radio and tuned it to WFUZ.

“You’re good on the radio, Roy,” a voice was saying. It was a high yet muffled voice. Eerie, as Harrison had described it. “Really, you’ve got a great voice. I’ve always wanted to a radio star with my very own radio show, Roy. You listening?”

“I’m still here.”

“Either one of us would be better than that Billy Boyden jerk.”

Boyden’s was the show Harrison was guesting on. He kept admirably silent.

“Maybe you should tell me your real name,” Harrison said, “and put an end to all this. A psychologist told me today that you hate what you’re doing and secretly want to be caught.”

Laughter. “A psychologist, huh? Probably his name is Frank Novachek.”

Novachek took a step back in surprise. The arsonist knew plenty about the city’s fire department, even its arson investigation division.

“Listen, Dante — “

But the arsonist cut off Harrison. “You listen, my friend. I’m going to turn this city into an inferno of justice. No one will know if they’re going to wake up the next morning. You can’t stop me. No one can. Not Novachek, not the police, not the media.”
“People are dying!” Harrison said.

“And people are trying to trace this call. So I’m hanging up now, Roy. I’ll be in touch, but if not, I’ll see you in hell.” He was laughing as he hung up the phone.

“I don’t think he has such a hot voice,” Billy Boydon said.

Novacheck switched off the radio. He called Williams and asked him if the call had been traced. Williams checked and said that there hadn’t been time. Dante was no amateur. It would take more than amateurs to catch him.

After hanging up the phone, Novacheck sat thinking about what he’d heard, what he’d learned so far. Dante had said “an inferno of justice,” which suggested he felt he was righting some wrong that had been done to him. And it was obvious he had a grudge against firefighters or the fire department.

Novacheck picked up the phone again. He had Jones pull the files of the dead firefighters.

By the next afternoon he thought he had something, but he wasn’t sure what. Mostly it was the gut feeling that he was on the right track. Amateur stuff, Williams would call it, but Novacheck had learned to trust his instincts.

The four dead firefighters had graduated from the department academy in the same class two years ago. There had been twenty-three members of that class. Which might mean nineteen more potential victims, a thought that made Novacheck shudder. The class had been divided into four rookie brigades — the Diamond, Star, Rose, and Shield brigades. Rookies in all four brigades wore distinguishing emblems, to promote the kind of competitiveness and unit pride that helped make the Metro City Fire Department one of the best in the country.

Novacheck scratched his chin. Nineteen more potential victims also meant nineteen suspects. Any one of them might hold a grudge against the department and be mentally unstable in some way not immediately apparent. Fire could fascinate and consume in more ways than one. And Dante was obviously in the grip of a murderous obsession.

Then Novacheck chomped down hard on his cigar. Maybe not nineteen suspects at all.

He picked up the phone and talked to Jones again. “Find out about that graduating class,” he said. “But not the ones who made it through and became firefighters. I want to know about the ones who flunked out.”

It didn’t take Jones long to get back to him with the information.

Three men had been unable to graduate, and one had quit after an argument with an instructor. Novacheck called Williams and asked him to provide information on the four men. Then he called Harrison at the Metro City Dispatch. A deal was a deal.

Harrison was sitting in Novacheck’s office when Williams sent over the files on the four class dropouts by messenger. The four men had belonged to different rookie brigades. All four men were still in Metro City.

They were: Joe Wish, who now ran a diner on the City’s east side; Lenny West, now selling insurance; Ralph Tailor, still unemployed. The man who had quit the department
was Charlie Parvis, presently an exterminator.

Harrison accompanied Novacheck to talk to the four men.

"I was with the Diamond Brigade," Wish said from behind the counter of his diner. The place was newly constructed but built to look as if it had once been a railroad car. Wish was a short stocky man, wearing a white apron and chewing on a matchstick. A pack of cigarettes was rolled up into his T-shirt sleeve.

"How's business?" Novacheck asked.

"Booming," Wish said. "You guys want lunch?"

Novacheck told him no thanks. Harrison said he'd have a cheeseburger.

"What did you do before you joined the fire department?" Novacheck asked.

"I was in the Navy Air Force, a navigator in a fighter-bomber. Then the Navy started cutting back, and I resigned my commission. Life in the civilian world was tougher than I thought. I learned that fire was something I was plenty afraid of, then I learned to cook and invested my savings in this place. Now I've got three cooks working for me."

"So flunking out of the academy was actually a break for you?"

"Best thing that every happened to me," Wish said. "I was bitter at the time, but I wasn't meant to be a firefighter. They not only risk their lives on a regular basis, they have to stay involved in ongoing study and training. They're like pilots. Special people." He shrugged and smiled. "I'm not one of them."

Novacheck asked a few more basic questions, then thanked Wish for his time and left the diner. In the car, he turned to Harrison. "What do you think?"

"Great cheeseburger," Harrison said.

Lenny West was a man with incredibly dark shifty eyes, and a relatively weak looking physique. He looked as if he'd never been in good shape and he was losing his hair and had it plastered over the thinning area, fooling no one. "I wish I'd sold those poor guys fire insurance," he said from behind the desk in his office. "At least the families would have got something."

"My information tells me you were in the Star Brigade at the academy," Novacheck said.

"For a while," West said. He smiled and shook his head. "I never had the physique for the job, so I couldn't keep up with the physical requirements and the department let me go."

"You sell fire insurance?" Harrison asked.

"Not much, but some. Mostly I sell auto insurance, and some home insurance that includes fire protection. You interested?"

"I don't believe in insurance," Harrison said.

"You will, when you get a little older and wiser. I believe in what I sell. I have to work that way. Before my sidetrack into the department, I was a schoolteacher in a little town down south. Education's just another form of insurance."

They talked for another ten minutes, then West's phone began to ring, and Novacheck said good-bye.
“I hope you catch that Dante creep,” West said, his hand cupped over the receiver.

Ralph Tailor, who had flunked out of the Rose Brigade, was sitting alone and unemployed in his west side basement apartment. He was a gaunt man, wearing a long-sleeved denim shirt despite the hot afternoon. Novachek wondered if the shirt concealed needle marks on his arm. Tailor had the emaciated, haunted look of a junkie.

“I used to sew,” he said, “making alterations for a department store. Tailor the tailor, they called me.” He laughed, but there was no humor in it.

“Why did you try for a job with the fire department?” Novachek asked.

Tailor shrugged. “They were hiring, and a job’s a job. But it was tougher than I thought, so when I flunked out of the academy, I wasn’t sorry.”

As he left Tailor to his self-pity, Novachek wondered how much the man blamed the fire department for his plight.

Charlie Parvis had been with the Shield Brigade. He wore a shield now that said “Ace Exterminators” and was interrupted while spraying for pests.

“You were a photographer at one time, right?” Novachek said.

“I quit that six months ago,” Parvis said. “Not enough people wanted their pictures taken. Before that, I was a police officer over in Reaverstown.”

“You like this kind of work?” Harrison asked.

“Sure,” Parvis said. “Somebody needs to rid the world of pests.”

“Then why did you try to become a fireman?” Novachek asked.

Parvis shrugged his broad shoulders. “Bugs, rodents, flames—they all cause problems for people. The fire department didn’t want me, so now I spray bugs instead of fires.”

That made a certain amount of sense, Novachek thought, as they finished talking to Parvis, then drove away.

After further examining the clues in Harrison’s box, and mulling over what he’d learned, Novachek called a meeting with Williams and Harrison. It was the fifth day after the apartment fire.

When the other two men arrived, they found a peg board on which were mounted numerous clues. Novachek told them that various clues pointed to all four of the suspects, but all of the clues pointed to only one suspect.

**PIECE TOGETHER THE PUZZLE AND SEE IF YOU CAN SOLVE THE BURNING QUESTION... WHO’S SENDING METRO CITY UP IN FLAMES?**
THE SOLUTION:

"It was the photo of the actress that got me thinking," Novosher said. "Along with the radio call-in show and the gates of the fitness center.

So far, we're in 'Harrietson's' bar, pointing at the dog's back.

"I've looked around. We don't have much faith in Novosher's 'sight.'

"The navigator's chart and the doors point to the west of the Sisal Bridge.

"Novosher said, 'since we're near the sea, navigator and in the university, these map are described as 'isograms in the sky.' West of the Sisal Bridge is also a possibility, perhaps."

"And of course the best option to continue our investigation. Pairs might be the subject of these puzzles, too, since D, S. S. Turner's police chief and was a member of

the Sisal Bridge.

"The sunrise photo could point to Tidal, who was near the Rose Bridge, since the sun rises west of the Sisal Bridge.

"But remember, all these clues refer to only one suspect, a man who secretly regards to be great.

"We're writing 'Williams's sight' according to his watch.

"Williams's sight' according to his watch."

"And the rest of the clues? Williams's sight, 'position on the call.'

You're forming a start, "Harrietson said."

"The actors in the movie's illusion is a woman's star. The actress said on the call."

"And the gates of the fitness center, 'Harrietson asked, fiscinating now.

"Novosher stepped to the board and fire a part of the mark, positioning the location of

the first site. Without firing the pistol, he traced a line from location to location in the order of the gates of the fitness center.

"Right? The third is the location of the map. He traced a line in the home of both. Simpler, another victim, who's graduated from the festival classes at the academy.

"Williams's was a series on his feet, turning toward the phone.

The姆e team hired and been moved out. Danke had to know it was a trap, but he didn't anyway. In a way, if we're not mistaken.

"Shining out of sight, police and the entire block under observation. Novosher.

"The critical pack of the puzzle is on fire. "Harrietson yelled, running in from the kitchen.

"Everybody out of there!" Novosher said frantically, and repeated from all over the

front door.
A moutd pack. "Williams stepped toward the three battalion and ran with them sound the corner of the burning house. The attic small of the fire bunker Novack's hose and made his eyes water. Police and fire department men were worried in the distance.

When Novack and Harrison reached the packyard, Novack saw that the fire had already been claimed to the house. It was on both levels and flames were licking out from inside. The roof was already blazing. Fortunately the smokestack family wasn’t in danger, and they had time to evacuate. Novack knocked sound not surprised to see that the resevoir had made his escape. Williams and your police unit stood toward the pack of the dangerous.

Giant, helplessly watching the flames.

Then something registered in Novack’s mind. He walked calmly toward the pack of fire.

"Get him!" Williams shouted. Suddenly realizing there was an extra battalion.

But it was Novack who had the momentum and managed to tackle the man and grab him. Novack moved closer and held him. He was trying to say something to Novack.

"Thank you!" West continued to thank Novack. West moved closer and pressed his foot to the floor. He was trying to say something to Novack.

Williams tossed the flickers of Engine 238 extinguish the fire, with smoke.

Novack watched the flickers of Engine 238 extinguish the fire, with smoke.

"You’re welcome."

BURNING EVIDENCE