

# CITY OF FIRE

Robert Ellis



St. Martin's Minotaur

New York



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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**CITY OF  
FIRE**

**Also by Robert Ellis**

*The Dead Room*

*Access to Power*

*To Charlotte*

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**CITY OF  
FIRE**

# 1

**S**he rolled over in bed, nudging the corner of the pillow with her cheek and burrowing in. Dreaming. Sleeping. Searching out cool spots with her legs and feet beneath the clean sheets and extra blanket.

She could hear the curtains moving somewhere in the foggy haze at the edge of her dream. Moist, chilly air filtering in through the open window from the ocean. The promise of sunshine burning the clouds away sometime tomorrow afternoon.

It was April in Los Angeles—Nikki Brant’s favorite month of the year. And things were good right now. Better than they had ever been before.

She groped in the darkness for a second pillow and drew it closer, snuggling with it and pretending that she wasn’t alone. She was dreaming about her secret. Her special secret. The one her doctor told her just after lunch. The one that began with a single word.

*Congratulations.*

Nikki didn’t really hear the rest. Nothing registered after that word. She couldn’t concentrate because her heart was beating so fast—everything streaming by in a joyous blur. It began the moment her doctor stepped into the examination room and flashed that smile. The moment she caught the glint in her doctor’s eye.

But her doctor was only confirming it for her. Deep inside she already knew.

She stirred and cracked her eyes open, sensing that someone had entered the bedroom. It was James, home from another late night at work. She could see his figure in the darkness, the rim of light from the clock radio behind him outlining his body in neon blue. It seemed as if he was staring at her from the foot of the bed as he got out of his jacket and loosened his tie.

A dog started barking somewhere in the distance.

She guessed it might be that small, white terrier three doors down the street, but she wasn't exactly sure. Her doctor had given her something to help with the nausea, saying it wouldn't hurt but might make her feel drowsy. When the dog quieted, Nikki glanced at James's figure and lowered her head—drifting off again—her body weighted down in the ecstasy of fatigue.

They had met three years ago after being introduced by a mutual friend in graduate school at the University of Oregon. James was high-strung and hard to read at first. He was in his last year at the Lundquist College of Business. She was finishing her dissertation in art history and had already been hired by a small college in Pasadena to begin teaching the following year. At the time, it seemed as if they were from two different planets spiraling in opposite directions. But James was persistent, and after a while he began to grow on her. There was something about his smile. Something about the way he made her feel when he told one of his corny jokes and looked at her with those big brown eyes of his. Within six months they were living together. On the first anniversary of their meeting, they were married. Forget the honeymoon—they were too busy packing. They found a house in West L.A. and would be living within walking distance to the beach.

But when should she tell him her secret?

She opened her eyes again. James remained at the foot of the bed. She wondered how long she had been asleep but couldn't see the time because he was still blocking the clock radio on the dresser. After a moment, he pulled his shirt out of his trousers and began unbuttoning it.

When should she tell him?

That was the big question. She wanted the moment to be just right.

For the past ten days James had been working until dawn, only coming home to grab a few hours' sleep before showering and changing and heading back to work again. He was the chief financial officer for a small company merging with a larger one. A young man in an even younger company that no one thought would end up being a company at all. James was overseeing

the audit before the deal was finalized. Even though he told her that the merger was friendly, he seemed nervous about it, even grumpy. She knew that he was trying to prove himself. That he was hoping he would still be needed when the two companies eventually came together as one.

She eased her way back to the surface.

Peeking over the blanket, she watched him toss his trousers on the chair and step out of his boxer shorts. As he peeled off his socks, he lowered his head and the clock finally came into view. It was early. Only 1:30 a.m. When he called to check in at ten, he told her that he would see her in the morning. She couldn't make out his face in the darkness, but it looked as if he was smiling. Maybe they decided to take the night off. Or just maybe the audit was finally done, and they could have their lives and marriage back again.

She wanted to say something to him but was afraid he might guess her secret by the tone of her voice. She wanted to sleep with her secret. Revel in it on her own for a night or two or even longer until she picked exactly the right time. She knew it wouldn't be easy. She also knew that James wouldn't be as happy about the news as she was. A couple of times last week she'd given him hints—tried to feel him out—but the whole thing turned into one big argument. A horrible fight that lasted longer than all the others and ended in a torturous day of *the silent treatment*. Why couldn't he understand why this was so important to her?

That stupid dog started barking again. Louder this time, and at a higher pitch.

She sensed James moving toward her in the darkness. He pulled away the second pillow and slipped beneath the covers on her side of the bed. He kissed her on the lips, deeper than she expected. Harder than she was used to. As he rubbed up against her, she realized that he wanted to make love. She smiled and sighed and kissed him back with her eyes closed, wishing she hadn't taken that damn pill.

He stroked her chin with his finger. She could smell all over his skin the scent of the soap they used at the office. It was laced with cocoa butter, reminding her of suntan lotion and days spent lazing side by side on the hot sand at the beach. On a chilly night in April, the fragrance seemed so out of place.

He rolled over her leg, finding the center. As he entered her, she wrapped

her arms around him and held on as well as she could. Drifting. Sleeping. Keeping her secret locked away in her dreams. She was glad that he'd come home early tonight, glad they were together. This was the way things were supposed to be.

James and Nikki Brant together.

Funny, but she didn't remember hearing his car pull into the drive, or even the sound of the front door, which always seemed to open with a deafening creak. . . .

## 2

**L**ena Gamble dropped the crossword puzzle on the table and reached for her coffee mug. As she sipped through the steam, the piping hot brew tasted rich and strong and just about perfect. Starbucks House Blend, purchased at the Beachwood Market for three times as much money as any other brand. For Lena the additional expense was worth it—her one big gift to herself—and she brewed it by the cup every morning with a teakettle and filter paper as if a junkie doling out heroin in a red-hot spoon.

She was sitting by the pool, trying to wake up and watching the sun rise over Los Angeles. Her house was perched on top of a hill over Hollywood, east of the Cahuenga Pass and just west of Beachwood Canyon—the view magnificent from here. She could see the clouds plunging in at eye level from the ocean fifteen miles away, the Westside still shrouded in a dreary gray. To the east the marine layer had already burned off, and the Library Tower, the tallest building west of Chicago, glowed a fiery yellow-orange that seemed to vibrate in the clear blue sky.

For fifteen minutes the city had the look and feel of a postcard—the kind a tourist might send back home while on vacation in paradise. For fifteen minutes it all looked so peaceful.

This was an illusion, of course. A trick that played with the senses. Lena knew that Los Angeles was the murder capital of the country. Over the past month there had been thirty-plus murders—more than one homicide for

each day of the week. But at dawn on this day, the air was almost clean, the streets appeared almost manageable, and she still had half an hour or so before she had to leave for work.

She glanced back at the house, noticed that she forgot to close the screen door on the slider, but didn't get up. Instead, she pressed her shoulders into the chair and let her eyes wander down the steps off the porch, along the stone pathway by the garden, and then up the side of the house to her bedroom window on the first floor. It wasn't a big house. Still, it was her anchor to the city. The only real thing keeping her here other than her job. She'd inherited the property from her brother, David, five years ago.

Built in 1954, the house would probably have been called a modern version of a California Craftsman back then. But every time Lena looked at the weathered cedar siding, the shutters and white trim, she couldn't help but think that it belonged on a beach at Cape Cod rather than the top of a hill in Hollywood. It was an eclectic mix of wood and glass that had somehow managed to stay nailed together after five decades of what they called seasons here. The earthquake season seemed to run off and on for twelve months out of the year. But there was also the fire season, the Santa Ana wind season, and if you were really lucky, enough rain to fill the reservoirs, marking the start of flood season.

David had bought the house because their parents were long gone, and he'd always said that if he ever made any money, he would buy a place in this world that he and his big sister could call home. But it wasn't the warmth that seemed to emanate from the house, or even the view of the city and basin, that caught David's eye. It was the land, the privacy, and finally, the garage—a two-story building that stood fifty feet away on the other side of the drive. The David Gamble Band needed a home as much as he and his sister did, and that garage looked as if it had potential. Once a down payment was made and the papers were signed, David used what money he had left to convert the building into a state-of-the-art recording studio. A photograph of his pride and joy appeared on the inside booklet of the band's third CD.

But that was all over now. The studio was dark and quiet and had been that way for the past five years. The band's third album had been their final one. And David died before they could tour and bring home any real money.

Lena took another sip of coffee, the hot caffeine lighting up her stomach but not doing much for her head. She had gone fifteen days without a break at work until yesterday, and she felt groggy after taking the day off. Besides, she didn't like thinking about her brother. She missed him and the loss was still way too painful.

Lena was alone, holding the world and the people in it at arm's length. She couldn't help the way she felt, and she couldn't do anything to change what had happened in the past. Still, she worried that she was dumping too much of her paycheck into the house. That she spent too much time trying to keep the place up. That somehow her home had become an obsession, and she was clinging to the property because she couldn't deal with her brother no longer being here. Things had been so good when he was around.

She picked up the Calendar section of the newspaper, deciding to take another stab at that crossword puzzle. It was Friday, and the puzzles were becoming more difficult with each day of the week. Lena enjoyed the challenge because it took her mind off things. And she was good at it, using a pen rather than a pencil, except on Sundays. But as she reread the last three clues, she knew that it was hopeless. The key seemed to be 51 DOWN, a ridiculously easy clue referring to a woman who'd won a million dollars in a reality series on TV. Lena didn't watch much television and only turned it on when she had to. She didn't like what the box did to her head.

She tossed the puzzle down in frustration, sifting through the paper until she found the California section. A local story on page three caught her interest. A twenty-nine-year-old woman from Santa Monica was claiming to be pregnant even though she hadn't had sex for two years. Lena started reading the article but stopped when her eyes slid across the word *Jesus*. She shook her head. This was the kind of story that seemed to make the news these days, part of the routine and fabric of the city that everyone else in the country called L.A. Lena was twenty-nine and hadn't had sex in two years either. With no one on the immediate horizon, she didn't consider her quandary a laughing matter.

Her cell phone rang. She looked at it on the table, recognized the caller on the LCD screen, and opened it. It was her partner, Hank Novak, calling at 6:00 a.m. They worked out of the Robbery-Homicide Division. Lena guessed that Novak's call had nothing to do with an immaculate conception in Santa Monica, or getting laid by Jesus.



“Hope you’re rested,” Novak said.

“Yeah, I’m good,” she said. “What’s up?”

She grabbed her pen. She could tell from the gravelly tone of her partner’s usually smooth voice that he hadn’t been up for long. From the sound of the wind in the background, he was on a freeway somewhere rolling at high speed.

“Nine thirty-eight Oak Tree Lane,” he said. “West L.A. Page forty in my fifteen-year-old *Thomas Guide*. Take Sunset out to Brooktree Road and hang a left. Looks like it’s a block past the entrance to Will Rogers State Park. Oak Tree’s off Brooktree about a quarter mile down on the right.”

“Sounds like a lot of trees,” she said.

“I thought so, too. The house you’re looking for should be the third one on the left. By the time you get there, it’ll probably be easy enough to spot.”

She was writing everything down on the masthead of *The Times*, becoming concerned because Novak was spitting his words out and seemed all tanked up. He’d never acted this way before, but then, they were still getting used to each other.

Lena had worked out of the Hollywood Division until two months ago, when she was promoted to the elite Homicide Special Section under a new mentoring program established by the LAPD. She was the youngest detective at the table, one of only two women in RHD, and had been fast-tracked up the line because there was yet another chief in town and he wanted to change the face of the department one more time. Although she hadn’t been chosen for her sex, she knew that to some degree her gender would always be in play as long as she remained a cop. But it was her age that had given her the boost this time, and her promotion had been one of many across the board. The average age of the department had slipped to just twenty-five. Everyone knew that cops were leaving the city in droves, headed out of the combat zone for greener pastures, and that those who stayed had their eyes on retiring with a full pension before they left town. The new chief understood that the institutional memory of the department was in serious jeopardy. And he was right. Although Lena had earned praise from her commanding officer and quickly risen as an investigator in Hollywood, her experience was limited to two years working narcotics and burglary, six months ferreting out white-collar deadbeats in bunco forgery, and only another two and a half years at the homicide table. Investigating a