

**WILLIAM KING**

**PROJECT  
INFERNO**

**INFILTRATION BOOK 1**

Chapter 1



## Chapter 1

In his home in Los Altos, California, John Davidson was tossing and turning around three a.m. when his mind became dimly aware that an alarm was going off in the distance. He was puzzled, since it just didn't make any sense to him that it was already time to get up for work. He just wanted to catch a few more seconds of sleep. It was still dark outside, so either he had set the alarm incorrectly or something was wrong. Then it dawned on him that it was not the alarm clock that was buzzing. No, it was a fire alarm somewhere in the house, and it was blasting away. That realization jerked him out of his drowsiness and sent a shock of adrenaline surging through his body. He could feel his heart racing. "Joann! You need to wake up!" he said to his wife. "Wake up, I said! There's a fire in the house! You need to call 9-1-1 and tell them to get the fire department here right away. I think the kids are in danger. I'll go down there and see what's going on."

John ran down the hallway to the kids' bedroom, where he found his two children fast asleep. He could not believe they were oblivious to the loud fire alarm. Looking across the room, he could see a small blaze burning in the closet. "Wake up." He shook his older one aggressively and then scooped up his youngest. "You need to get ready to go outside. Grab your robe or a jacket or blanket or something because you may be outside for a while. I'm not sure how long that's going to be, but it's cool out there." He grabbed some warm clothes from the top drawer and rapidly escorted them down the hallway and out the front door to the yard. "Stay here. Don't wander off."

As John was going back into the house, he ran past his wife near the front door. "The fire department is on the way. They told me they would be here in about five minutes," she said.

John returned to the kids' bedroom, and looking in from the hallway, he could see that the fire was already generating a lot of smoke and the flames were starting to crawl up the closet door and into the ceiling. It was getting serious quickly, spreading rapidly. John was becoming more frantic; he thought about getting a fire extinguisher, but panicked when he remembered that he didn't have one. Buying one had been on his to-do list for a long time, and he felt guilty that his laziness meant that they didn't have one now that they actually needed one. So, that was a useless idea. He thought about going back down the hallway to the guest bathroom to fill a bucket with water to stamp out the flames, but he realized he didn't have a bucket there either. John stood in the doorway, helplessly watching the fire grow and hoping that the fire department would arrive soon.

The fire department showed up within ten minutes. John told them where the fire was located to save time. Three firemen entered the house wearing facemasks and protective coats, carrying fire extinguishers on their backs resembling scuba gear with small hoses attached and filled with water. They were able to douse the fire inside the closet, but the firemen reported that a small part of the fire on the floor seemed to be unusually persistent and resistant to their efforts. He heard the one in charge say to his colleague, "Hey, Murphy, go back out to the truck and get one of those foam extinguishers. I think there's one near the back seat." When Murphy came back into the house he used the foam extinguisher and it appeared to work better than the water extinguisher. Nevertheless, the center of the flames seemed more difficult to put out, but nobody commented on it at the time.

Another group of firemen had worked on the fire from the exterior of the house. They ran hoses to the back of the house and sprayed the walls and roof to prevent it from spreading. Their efforts were successful, but clearly that corner of the house was soaked and there were a few small holes in the roof where the fire had apparently broken through.

By the time the fire had been extinguished, it had caused significant damage, and there were strong lingering odors of burnt metal, plastic, wood, and paint. There was a pile of burnt objects on the closet floor, the interior walls were gutted, the door was destroyed, and the fire had worked its way up the walls into the attic. In the attic and roof it had caused structural damage as well. It had also created a large hole in the exterior wall because the closet was located adjacent to the outside.

John was thinking that it was very fortunate that they were able to put it out before it could burn the whole house down. Once it was out, the firemen started to pack up their gear to leave. John asked them, "Why would a fire suddenly start in the closet like that?"

The fire was extinguished, and the emergency over, and John noticed that the firemen seemed sort of disinterested, if not plain bored. He assumed that in their minds, the event was over, and they were intent on going home. They had seen enough fires in their careers and weren't particularly interested in solving mystery causes. The lead fireman agreed that it was pretty unusual for a fire to spontaneously start on the floor of a closet. But since they were able to put it out with minimal damage (their opinion, not John's), and no one was injured, it wasn't worth dwelling on. "Just be happy we were able to catch it early and that no one was hurt."

After they had departed, John had the kids pack up some clothes and he took the family to a local hotel. The house had a big hole in the rear walls allowing cold air to flood in. He had no way to plug up the damage, and he was bone tired at any rate. He also wanted to get them out of there in case another fire started. He just wasn't comfortable staying in the same house.

The next morning, John's insurance agent came to the house to process a claim. The agent began reviewing the burned areas to make his assessment. "Don't worry, John, this will be covered by your homeowners' policy. We will also cover the costs for your temporary housing, since I understand you had to go to a hotel last night. If you need to stay there for several more nights, that's fine. We will cover the cost of your living expenses until the repairs are done. Right now, I'm thinking that we can provide up to a week or two while we're fixing the house. I'll also help you make arrangements to have some of our approved construction outfits perform the work. They're pretty fast and do quality work. If you wish, we can do it in stages. That is, do some temporary repairs and then do the finishing repairs later at your convenience."

The insurance agent continued. "Overall, the incident seems pretty straightforward. Just looking at the damage, it's difficult to determine the cause, but I don't think it's worth bringing in an investigator. It was a relatively small fire, a minor incident, and frankly we will probably never be able to figure out the cause. So let's just let it go, and I'll make sure you get your claims covered. We'll just consider this a done deal and hopefully we have one more happy customer." He smiled reassuringly at John. But John thought that the bottom line for the insurance guy was avoiding the extra paperwork that an investigation would entail.

John felt like the whole incident was being treated too casually by the firemen and the insurance agent. And, even though he had asked about it, as far as he knew, they hadn't even filed a police report. He simply could not wrap his mind around how a fire could possibly start in the children's closet. The only electrical wiring in the closet led up the wall to a light fixture. And it just seemed from the scorch marks and burnt-out center of the closet floor that it originated there. John recalled that when he had first walked into the room he had seen the small fire on the floor. It was just baffling, and he had no idea what would possibly cause a fire to spontaneously start on the floor in the children's closet in the middle of the night. He felt that it might be important to figure it out so there wouldn't be a repeat episode. Perhaps there was some underlying problem with the house or the wiring. He wanted to resolve this mystery for the sake of his family's safety. It was critical for him to remove the risk to the family.

But maybe everyone was right, and he should move on and put the incident in his rearview mirror. After all, it was time to go to work at his job as a software engineering manager at a high-tech company in Silicon Valley. He had a demanding job with a lot of projects on his plate and he needed to focus on those. So he let the fire move to the back of his mind.

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# About William W. King

William W. King has moved through life exploring human interactions. Starting as a teacher and later as an engineer in the telecommunications industry, King found humor in the mundane. His keen observations and tongue-in-cheek attitude flow through his stories as he shares his observations about life, love, and work. William King lives in the Bay Area where he enjoys his third career as a writer.

## **Connect with William W. King**

Website: [www.whitewhaletales.com](http://www.whitewhaletales.com)

LinkedIn: [www.linkedin.com/in/william-king-187984100](http://www.linkedin.com/in/william-king-187984100)