

ARSON

PART ONE

Story by David Johnson, 1984

Artwork and lettering/finishes by David Johnson, 1987



Birmingham's city centre glowed with the flickering light of a raging fire that had all but consumed a two story building. Among the flame flecked spirals of acrid smoke, firemen gallantly stood their ground, succeeding in: preventing the fire from spreading. Beyond the cordon of policemen and fire appliances thronged a curious sea of faces, watching with fear and fascination as the fire was confronted. And among those faces one in particular, shielded from the night air by a dark hood, stared with knowing, satisfied eyes, Superintendent Black's stubbled chin bore witness to his sleepless all-night vigil in the special operations room of the London regional Task Force He, Smithson, a junior

minister from the Energy Dept and a score of other Officers, had nothing but weary faces to show for their days of perseverance.

Smithson's pale, balding head and middle age face was not enhanced by the grave expression he carried. "That's the seventh Nuclear Technology and Information Centre to be burned in a fortnight" he said sitting heavily in a chair. "And still we do not know who is behind these arson attacks." Black bit his lower lip and scratched his strong protruding chin, his brash northern temperament had worn thin. "If I don't catch these buggers soon the Chief will have me up by my ears.... But I don't know what I can do. There are hundreds of these Information Centres all over the country, and the Government refuses to close them down." Smithson closed his eyes and sat back. "This situation has even been raised at Cabinet level. They want action, and if they do not get it I will wind up on the back benches." Black buried his head in his hands, he was stumped!

The cold night air had a sharpness about it which forewarned of the approaching rain! Not content, the thickening clouds brought forth a chill wind which hastened the arrival of the first flecks of drizzle. Undaunted, Madame Mystery sprinted across the flat roof tops, bounding and leaping gracefully over the gaps and landing again lightly with feline

grace, Her tall slender form was covered from neck to toe by a dark seamless costume that highlighted her shapely feminine curves. Her firm but attractive face was masked, only revealing her clear determined eyes and closed, full lips. From her head, blowing in the damp wind waved a mane of long fair hair, as yet un-matted by the rain.

She had spent monotonous hours of the cold night travelling across Bristol in her unique unhindered fashion. From tall vantage points she could see miles across the brightly lit city to the estates beyond. Her eyes, aided by infra red lenses in her mask saw where others could not, and her strange senses guided her with an uncanny accuracy. Bristol has two of the recently launched Centres. One large set in the Broadmead shopping centre, the other much smaller and in the north of the city. To date the arsonist had only struck at the larger centres seeking publicity but tonight would mark a change in approach,

The badly lit street offered excellent cover as a cloaked figure approached the front of the glass plated frontage....

For a moment, the furtive figure fumbled excitedly with the lock, then it clicked and swung silently open. In an instant, the figure entered, and closed the door behind it, marking its presence with nought but a slight scuffle of shoes.

Inside, the figure brought forth a small torch, which shone a pencil thin beam of light. Purposefully, with the sure tread of a professional, the figure moved over to a table, where several piles of colourful information brochures and leaflets stood.

Contemptuously, he pushed the heavy pile onto the floor, scattering them wildly. Next it pulled from one of the cloaks' deep pockets, a small package. Attached to this compact explosive device, was a timing mechanism, comprising a watch and batteries. Setting the device in the mound of scattered leaflets, it set the mechanism in motion.

Inside the pale light of the torch, the face of the figure came partly into view, its lips curling with devilish satisfaction. Pensioners Mr & Mrs Thompson had lived in the rooms above the information centre, for almost thirty years, seeing it change from grocers to newsagents, through years of abandonment, to finally become an information centre. Whatever it had been, it had affected them little, as their entrance and stairs ran up the side between the centre and the jewellers next door. Only tonight was different. The choking black smoke that wafted up towards them, alerted their pet cat, in time to arouse its owners, before they slept forever. Yet by the time they had risen, and struggled to the top of the landing, their only exit was blocked by a wall of twisting flames. Madame Mystery saw the blaze from quite a distance, but even before that, her highly alert senses had forewarned her of danger. Bounding the assortment of roof tops in her breathtaking acrobatic style, she reached the blazing building well before anyone else.

A swift assessment of the situation showed that the ground floor centre was uncontrollably alight, only a shell of stone and metal was visible among the flames. From the upper floor, she saw columns of thick acrid smoke twisting away through an open window, and inside the obscuring vapours her extra keen eyes saw two people! Suddenly the old woman slumped from view, and the man fell with her, trying to hold her up.

Madame Mystery's mind raced. Stepping back into the street, she suddenly ran towards the old style street light outside the building, Leaping, then grabbing the right angle bar of the light, she swung upwards, somersaulting like a spinning top, and nimbly passing

through the open window, Before the old couple had time to realise what was happening, she had landed silently, and disappeared into the smoke.

She needed time. Time to soak their clothes in water, Time to make a rope of bed sheets. Time to lower then to safety, Closing her eyes, she concentrated, Turning her head slightly from side to side. Suddenly she sprang towards one of the walls, its paper peeling. Gritting her teeth, she slammed her trained fist through the thin plaster walls, revealing an aging pipe. Snatching up a discarded kitchen knife, she cut into the lead pipe, the lacerated hole spraying water all over the room. In seconds, all three were drenched, and the young woman had begun to knot their bed sheets together.

Speechless, the old woman stood, as she tied the rope around her waist, sat her on the window sill and began to lower her towards the ground. By now, the pavement thronged with dozens of people. As soon as one of the bystanders had released Mrs Thompson, the rope was raised and the same procedure used on Mr Thompson. Despite the spray of water, the Blames resumed their hungry lust, biting at Madame Mystery's back again.

Then suddenly, like an Olympic high diver, she launched herself from one window, somersaulted, and landed lightly on her toes. The crowd around her stood in awe.

"Tiger. Tiger is still up there groaned the man suddenly, and for the first time, Madame Mystery heard cries of a cat from the inferno. For a second she stood. No human life was worth risking for a mere animal. But she sensed that the feline companion had alerted them. Without further thought, she clambered up the light post again, and swung for the window, the heat clawing out towards her. Once inside, her affinity with animals guided her to the singed and terrified creature, clasping it she turned, avoiding part of the ceiling, as it fell around her, blazing. In another second she was free, spinning and landing on the pavement, outside. Handing the cat to the crying woman, Madame Mystery pushed back her matted and singed hair, smiled, then vanished into the shadows. For a moment the crowds did nothing, then spontaneously they clapped and cheered.

"Another fire" mumbled Smithson bitterly, knowing the cabinet would be giving him a grilling later that day. "But this time we do have a lead." said Black. "This woman, Madame Mystery, the Newspapers have dubbed her. She was at the scene."

Smithson frowned. "But she saved the occupants, and if any of her previous escapades are anything to go by, she certainly is not a criminal." "You're probably right.. . . . But just in case she does know more about these arson attacks than we do, we will get all the info we can on her."

Days later.

The cloaked figure unlocked the door to the Oxford Street information centre, with a quickness that ensured no one had seen its Midnight entry. Once inside, the orderly structure of the desks and cabinets was destroyed, as piles of files, papers and leaflets were scattered. Then, carefully the figure produced a small incendiary device and placed it among the mound of leaflets.

"So that's how you do it." said a cold hard voice suddenly, and the furtive figure span around bewildered, to come face to face with Madame Mystery. Suddenly the figure produced a pistol from the folds of the cloak, but Madame Mystery was quicker, her right foot lashing out and kicking it to the far side of the room! In one fluid movement, she

landed a left hand chop to the figures' throat, and it lurched backwards, coughing wildly. Madame Mystery pressed home her attack, and grabbed hold of the figures head, pulling it back, to reveal a woman's face, no older than her own.

Suddenly something struck her on the back of the head, she collapsed. When she first came around, she was aware of a cramped, confined sensation. As her vision focussed, and her senses she realised that she was sat upright in one of the office chairs. A sudden attempt at of pain shooting through her lower arms, and she realised that she was bound.

Her wrists were tied together, behind her back to a cross piece in the chair. Further lengths of cord bit into her upper arms and waist, where she had been bound to the chair to prevent any kind of movement. Already she felt the numbness caused by the lack of circulation, setting in her hands. Her knees had also been bound together, but as she awoke, she saw a new figure, a man, freeing a length of cord and kneeling before her. Suddenly Madame Mystery was aware of the woman's presence.