

DAVID SHESKIN

## SANCTUARY OF THE DAMNED

AFTER AN ARDUOUS TREK THROUGH THE JUNGLE, our tour guide brings us to a hotel in the centre of an obscure island located thousands of miles from civilization. While the other tourists attempt to cool off by going swimming, I decide to sit by the pool and rest my weary limbs. Within a few minutes I am joined by a large man wearing a heavy black cassock, a red skullcap, and a large white crucifix that appears to have been carved out of the tusk of some animal. During our trip through the jungle our guide told us about this man, a fallen Franciscan friar who is known among those who live on the island as *Padre*. Like most of the inhabitants, he is an expatriate who has been banished from civilized society, as he gradually succumbed to a lifelong fascination with fire. As we sit together he confides to me that in his forty-second year he burned down Rome's most famous opera house, which at the time was occupied with over two thousand people. After being apprehended by the authorities, he somehow managed to escape to Milan, where he set fire to a circus that was filled with more than one thousand children. During the next eight years he continued to indulge his obsession throughout Europe as well as three other continents. A few weeks before his fiftieth birthday he set his most spectacular fire—the New Year's Eve incineration of the Hotel Adelaide in Australia, which ultimately spread throughout the city and claimed the lives of more than five thousand people. By his own estimate, before he fled civilization twelve years ago and found sanctuary on this island, he had set well over seven hundred fires that had claimed the lives of at least one hundred thousand people. Although the history of his pyromania has been well-documented by numerous writers, in his opinion the most detailed and thoughtful chronicle of his career can be found in a psychiatric monograph entitled *Pyromania Universalis*, of which I of course am the author. As *Padre* continues to speak, he removes some wooden matchsticks from a box on the table before him. Concentrating intently, he arranges the matches in what appears to be some sort of design.

On closer inspection, I notice that they spell out my own name. As I silently reflect on what I know about the man, he removes yet another match from the box and uses it to ignite the design. Within a matter of seconds all that is left is a pile of ashes. Our business complete, he rises from his seat and invites me to attend mass later that evening in a chapel at the back of the hotel.