

Playing with Fire

By Kathryn A. Sullivan

Dr. Laura Wingate studied the wooden-handled pocket knife, looking at more than the bullet embedded in one side. Age should have lightened the wood to a grayish cast but instead it was no lighter a brown than the skin of her arm. She shifted the receiver to her right ear, wishing she had the person at the other end there before her. "From what you've told me, Mac, what you have here is an apport."

"A what?" demanded her caller.

Her dark eyes flashed with amusement as she shifted into lecture mode. "Apports are items that appear out of nowhere, usually during the use of psychic abilities. During the Edwarian and Victorian periods, they commonly appeared in association with psychic quests —"

She held the receiver away from her ear just as her associate, Professor J.J. Stillman, came through the doors to their office, briefcase in one hand and motorcycle helmet in the other. "Trouble?" he asked, wary concern crossing his boyish features.

Covering the mouthpiece, Laura used the receiver to point to the knife on the desktop before her. "Not yet, but I have a feeling there will be." Checking that her caller had stopped shouting, she returned the receiver to her ear. "MacGyver, I'm only telling you what I know. Are you on some sort of 'quest' that I should know about? Because if you are, I'd better send this back to you fast."

*Across the room, J.J. placed his helmet atop a filing cabinet and continued on to his desk, pulling off his leather jacket on the way. He sorted through the correspondence that their teaching assistant had left atop it, only half listening to the one-sided conversation as he realized that Celia had opened his mail **again**.*

"When are you going to be in this area? I'd really like to run some tests ... Okay, but if you get something else like this I want to know the second it appears, not a year or so after the fact!"

Adjusting his tie, J.J. scanned a "to all faculty" notice and snorted softly. "Typical."

"What's 'typical' this time?" Laura asked.

He looked up and, seeing that she had finished her phone conversation, waved the memo at her. "Dean Fleming is so politely reminding everyone that smoking is allowed only in offices. Which is a great way to irritate people, rather than simply coming out and asking everyone to be on the alert for a possible firebug."

"Is that what he's doing?" Laura began clipping her large ornate earrings — removed for the phone call — back on. "Are you analyzing the dean or just catching on to how universities communicate internally?"

He made a face at her reminder of how confusing university procedures still were to him, even after three years on the faculty. "Two fires in a row are more than just a coincidence."

*"More a nuisance, like the bomb threats before finals last year." She smiled and spread her hands at his expression. "C'mon, J.J. So, twice now, someone has shoved papers under an office door and set them on fire. Even the fire department wouldn't consider that a serious problem. Especially when they happened over a month apart. Larry's just overreacting, as usual." She thought a moment, then sorted through her stack of mail. "And **that** explains why all department chairs have this strange memo about teaching assistants." The chair of the Parapsychology Department frowned at the offending piece of paper. "'Be aware of odd behavior?'" She tossed it in the recycle bin.*

"She's opening my mail again," J.J. offered as evidence.

"That's not odd; Celia just thinks you're disorganized."

"She also thinks I should have grades posted the same day the papers are due," J.J. muttered. "That reminds me." He dug through the stack of brightly colored folders arranged on his desk and excavated an orange one. "I wanted you to see this report one of my students in the Intro class turned in."

"What's it about?" Laura stared dubiously at the folder he placed in her hand but began to flip through the pages.

"He was writing about the psychic traces of elements, such as water, minerals ..."

"Or fire?" Laura looked up at him. "He thinks it's possible to dowse for fire?"

"Is it possible?" He glanced at his watch, then went back to his desk to gather what he needed for his next class. "I mean, the technology exists to detect sources of heat —"

"More so than detecting water or copper," Laura completed. She frowned thoughtfully at the paper as he started loading the stack of folders into his briefcase. "You're thinking extra credit assignment? Sounds like a good idea." She paused, watching him curiously. "But what do you need my opinion for? Are you practicing psychiatry on the side again?"

J.J. straightened, closing his briefcase, and grinned sheepishly at her. "Maybe. I just wanted to check before he asked — if he did decide to try this as an extra credit assignment."

"Proving it impossible would be good for extra credit, too. Why must fire dowsing be possible for —" she checked the name inside the folder, "— Corey Kertiz?"

J.J. ran a hand through his dark hair. "He's a good kid — bright, asks a lot of intelligent questions in class, and seems very interested in the material."

"And —" Laura prodded, propping her chin on her hand.

He sighed, unable to put into words what had struck him about the freshman other than the obvious. "He's got a burn scar right about here," he said, fingering the right side of his jaw. "If it was a traumatic enough episode he could have a mild obsession about the cause —"

"And you didn't want to add to it," Laura finished with a slight nod.

"Yeah," J.J. agreed softly. He checked his watch and started out the door for his Introduction to Parapsychology class.

"J.J.," Laura called.

Turning, he saw the orange folder in her hand and started back across the room to retrieve it. "Let me know how the extra credit project turns out," Laura commented. "It could be an interesting paper."

* * *

A hiss came from the grayness about him, growing into a crackle that sounded almost like laughter. He whirled to face the sound and could almost see a glow in the distance, a glow that had a sensation of heat about it.

He started at a blast of sound from a stereo down the hall and his eyes focused on the words in the open book propped in his line of sight. "'Clear your mind of all outside disturbances.' Riight."

He began to get up from the desk when he saw what was on the desk top. The pen in his right hand clattered to the floor as he fell back into the chair, conscious only of the crackling laughter in his mind.

* * *

"Professor Wingate?" The tall student standing hesitantly in the doorway looked too young to be anything but a freshman, Laura decided. The short fringe of dreadlocks around the top of his head bobbed as he glanced nervously about the large office. "Professor Stillman told me to meet him

here." An old burn scar stood out vividly against his dark skin, reminding her of something J.J. had said a few days ago.

"Come on in and sit down, then," she welcomed. "He should be back in a moment."

She turned back to her computer screen but kept aware of the student's movements. Sometimes you could tell which students would decide to major in Parapsychology just from their reactions to the department office. He seemed interested in the masks and artifacts on the shelving inside the entrance, but seemed to do a doubletake when he turned to his left and saw all the high tech electronic equipment near J.J.'s workspace.

"Seismograph?" he muttered softly, the puzzlement in his voice louder than his words. "And that can't be a — no, can't be —"

Laura smiled slightly at the screen. Definitely a freshman, which was probably why she still couldn't place him. J.J. handled all the freshman classes this fall semester.

She closed the file and logged out of the computer. The student had followed the line of equipment shelves down the few steps to the lower center of the room. He dropped his backpack onto the nearer of the two couches and glanced toward the window of the darkened sleep lab. The burn scar along his right jaw was very noticeable from where she sat, and the memory of her conversation with J.J. suddenly clicked. "Extra credit assignment?" she asked.

He shrugged, more intent on the sleep lab's contents. "Maybe."

She rose and started down the steps from her workspace. "You're Corey Kertiz, aren't you? Dr. Stillman showed me your paper. That was an interesting theory of yours. I liked the way you mentioned that dowsing for fire could be useful for detecting forest fires or underground mine fires."

The thin student tensed. "It's ... not really a theory," he said softly. "I can —"

"Sharon's experiment is okay," J.J. announced as he came through the doors. "The lab did have some smoke damage, but the animals are all right."

"What was the cause of the fire this time?" Laura glanced aside when the student made a faint sound. "There was a fire last night," she explained.

"Last night?" The student took three steps back and dropped onto the couch. "A fire?" His skin had paled to almost to the shade of her complexion.

"Oh, hi, Corey." J.J. put his briefcase on his desk and started down the steps. "Someone put a box of papers outside the door to a lab further down the hall from our lab and set it on fire. I'm just glad it was the labs in the Medical building and not this one, the Med has better ventilation."

Laura kept most of her attention on the student. If it was possible for someone to be both upset and relieved at the same time, then that was how she would describe his expression. "Do they know what time this happened, J.J.?"

"Not long after ten — which means someone from the night classes could have set it and left."

"Corey here was just telling me that he could sense fires," Laura said, waiting for the student's reaction. "Did you sense the one last night, Corey?"

"How did you know —" Corey began just as J.J. exclaimed "He can?" J.J. turned excitedly to the student as Corey looked wildly at her. "Did you read that chapter on meditation in the book I loaned you?"

*"But I —" Disbelief in his eyes, Corey turned away from staring at Laura to answer his instructor. "I was reading it last night and trying one of the methods when I — I **must** have sensed it last night, then."*

"Sensed it how?" J.J. asked, sitting on the edge of the opposite couch.

"I — heard it. I've always heard fire, even before —" His hand half raised toward the scar, and J.J. nodded encouragingly. "But this time it was different."

"How so?" Laura queried, settling on the arm of the sofa near J.J.

Corey pulled a folder out of his backpack and held it out to her. Laura recognized the standard university folder usually distributed to freshmen during the orientation tours. The back cover with the campus map was uppermost and after a moment's study, Laura noticed the black circle within the Medical Building, right about where the second floor labs would be. "I don't even remember drawing it," Corey said nervously as she passed the folder on to J.J. "I was practicing what the book said to do ... then I got distracted. I thought the exercise didn't work, but when I looked down ... it —" he pointed at the mark, "— was there and the pen was in my hand."

"You've never done anything like this before?" J.J. pursued, handing the folder back to Corey.

*The freshman shrugged. "I've always been aware when fire was nearby — the stove when I was in the kitchen — my parents finally gave up and got an electric one — the burners in Chemistry lab when I was in high school — but I was in my dorm room last night. Nowhere near the labs! I've **never** heard any fire that far away before, and I've certainly never been marking any maps." He shook his head. "This is pretty weird even for me."*

"Laura, do you think we can test this?"

"I don't see why not," she replied, mentally reviewing the supplies they had on hand. "We still have the equipment we used on the Fullman case. Celia's just about done with the last project you gave her —" she raised her eyebrows at J.J. as he opened his mouth, so he quickly closed it and tried to look long-suffering, "— so she can give us a hand as well." She turned to the increasingly nervous student. "Do you want to try, Corey?"

Corey glanced at the array of electronic equipment near J.J.'s workspace and J.J. said hurriedly, "It won't hurt, and we can pay for your time —"

"J.J., the budget," Laura warned.

"— some of your time. And you'll have additional material for your extra credit paper."

The student was frightened as well as nervous, Laura realized. She remembered how Becky Fullman had described her fire-detecting experiences. "You said you 'heard' the fire, Corey? What does it sound like?"

"Like laughter." Corey looked straight at her. "Like it's laughing at me." He absently fingered the scar on his face. Suddenly a look of incipient panic filled his eyes. "You've got to help me. It's coming for me."

"You feel you're in danger?" she asked calmly. She pitched her voice to its most soothing timbre in an effort to stem the fear that was visibly rising in Corey. She avoided looking at J.J. beside her, but wondered why he was letting her do the talking. This conversation had moved out of parapsychology and into his former field, yet he was taking only a passive role in the exchange. Not like him at all.

The student shook his head. "Not ... now. Not right away. I was five when this —" he gestured at the scar, "— happened. It's been laughing at me ever since, just letting me know it's around." Taking a deep breath, Corey rose and walked over to the sleep lab. From his body language, the edge of the panic seemed dulled now, but still lurking in the background. Laura watched his reflection in the darkened window and saw his eyes widen fractionally, as though some shocking image had suddenly come into his field of vision. Corey backed up, shaking his head. "I don't know. I — I've got to get to class." He picked up his backpack and hurried out the doors, brushing past a young woman with short brown hair and an equally short dress in the doorway.

* * *

He hurried down the stairs and out the building, then stopped and took a deep ragged breath,

willing the images in his head to disappear. He knew what was happening — he was taking Psychology 102 — and he was not going to panic. Those half-forgotten memories — images of smoke and flames, the sensation of heat against his face that would later turn into searing pain, the shrill pitch of children's screams — had been triggered by his new interest in analyzing his ability to sense fire. The fact that they had started to appear during his talk with the professors and grown more vivid the longer he had talked was not due to "fire" trying to frighten him, but simply as a result of his thinking about when and how his ability worked.

He glanced up at the Life Sciences building. He should go back, now, and schedule a time for the tests they wanted to run. He wanted to understand this ability. To think that he had a psychic ability, something to be proud of! He shouldn't be frightened by childhood memories! "Show me, coz," a voice from his memory whispered, followed by screams. Shaking his head, he glanced at his watch and decided to wait until after his next class.

* * *

The brunette straightened the stack of mail in her hands and glanced down the corridor at the retreating back of the black student. "What's with him?"

"Morning, Celia," Laura greeted absently, then turned towards J.J. "Think he'll be back?"

J.J. ran a hand through his brown hair. "Can't tell. I'm glad you picked up the questioning, though — as his teacher, I can't afford to scare him out of the classroom."

"So you figured any negative associations were safer made with me." Laura grinned twistedly. "Thanks."

J.J. nodded in agreement, too distracted to notice the sarcasm. "He's a good kid. And he seems genuinely interested." He rose and went toward his desk, pointedly removing one letter from Celia's grasp on the way. "Just in case, I think I want to check on Becky's schedule. Talking to her might help him."

"**Who** him?" Celia asked.

Laura only waved at her to be quiet. "Good idea. And let her Chief know what we're doing as well."

"**What are** we doing?" Celia demanded. "Come on, guys — what are we talking about here?" She paused and her green eyes blazed with a new thought. "**Field work?** Look, you promised I'd have a chance —"

Laura merely glanced at their teaching assistant and continued, "I don't want him to hear a garbled

version third-hand. Especially with a firebug loose on the campus. You remember how Becky's co-workers felt about her."

"How?" the confused T.A. practically wailed.

J.J. nodded in agreement. "That she was setting the fires and only claiming to sense them." He stopped and looked at Laura.

Laura chewed her lip as her eyes darted to the doors. "J.J., you don't think —"

*Celia followed her gaze. "Him? He can sense fires? You don't think he's responsible for the ones lately, do you? Like that kid in **Firestarter**?" She finally gained the attention of both professors. "No, of course not," she faltered under their combined stare. "I mean, why draw attention to himself by coming in here if he was?"*

"Exactly," Laura affirmed.

J.J. frowned. "Unless he's not conscious that he's the cause."

"J.J.!" Laura protested.

"Unconscious mental projection, like in the Havers case," J.J. mused. He caught sight of Laura's expression. "Look, the map frightened him enough to come to us, but there's something else bothering him about the fire besides just being able to sense it. The way he kept reaching toward his scar and the way he described what he heard ..."

"That it was coming for him," Laura added pensively. "So, the sooner we get the Chief on our side, the better." Rising to her feet, she started up the steps to her own phone.

Celia shook her head and went toward Laura's desk, glancing through the stack of mail as she walked.

J.J. looked blankly at his colleague. "Our side?"

Laura picked up the receiver and began pressing buttons. "Who better than the Chief of the Fire Department to defend us against the dean, once he gets wind of this? You know how Larry overreacts."

Celia frowned at an "to all faculty" notice. "Did you know that Maintenance has received a memo about leaving around cleaning materials? We're supposed to report any unlocked janitor supply closets."

J.J. and Laura exchanged glances. "I'll phone Becky," J.J. repeated.

* * *

"Is everything all right with your Intro class, J.J.?" Laura asked from across the office late one afternoon.

J.J. sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I know what you're asking. Yes, Corey has been in class, and, no, he hasn't said a word about coming in. He hasn't said a word about anything! He just shows up for class and doesn't wait around after."

"It's just that it's been over a week since he was here." Laura finished writing her comments on the student paper before her, closed the folder, and placed it atop a growing stack.

"A week and a half," J.J. corrected. He leaned forward and opened a folder from his own stack of student papers.

"Just call me a miracle-worker," Celia announced as she entered the office. "I'm not up to Scotty's standards yet, but I'm getting close."

Laura leaned back in her chair with a faint chuckle. "Modesty, Celia? What have you been up to?"

"And where's the interlibrary loan book you went to pick up?" J.J. asked, eyeing the few sheets of paper she held.

*Celia regarded him loftily. "You requested it for Sharon; I dropped it off with Sharon. **This** — " she waved the loose sheets of paper — "represents several hours of patient, diligent hard work —"*

"What have you been up to, Celia?" Laura repeated.

Celia beamed. "Well," she began, starting slowly down the steps to the center of the room and taking center stage, "I noticed you both have been concerned about that freshman —"

"Corey," J.J. said wearily. "What did you do, Celia?"

"— and, knowing how you feel about hacking into student records —"

Laura straightened. "Celia, you didn't!"

Celia held up her hand. "I didn't. I just spent some time on the newspaper indexes and looked for

fires involving children about thirteen years ago. And I found him." She handed the pages to Laura with a flourish.

"Celia, you're brilliant," Laura said, looking at their T.A. in amazement.

"I know." Celia smiled smugly at J.J.

"Don't encourage her, Laura."

"Discouraging her has never worked," Laura reminded him absently, scanning the photocopied sheets. "Might as well — J.J., you were right about the fire. The newspaper reports that he was visiting his cousins. The police suspected that one of the boys was playing with matches. Both of his cousins and his aunt were killed in the fire, but the firefighters saved Corey."

"The very last article is about his time in the hospital," Celia added helpfully. "The staff all liked him."

Laura frowned thoughtfully and handed the articles to J.J. as he neared her desk. "Nothing there to explain why he hasn't come in."

"Guilt," Celia pronounced airily. "The survivor syndrome. He survived; they didn't. Or guilt because he was the one playing with matches."

"Thank you, 'Dr.' Powell," J.J. said sarcastically, studying the pages.

"Makes you wonder who's the psychiatrist," Laura quipped softly for her colleague's ears. He glanced at her and shook his head at her smile.

"I could be right," Celia persisted.

"J.J.?"

He grimaced. "She could have a point."

"Yes!" Celia crowed.

"Talking about his ability might have triggered flashbacks," J.J. continued. "He's been looking on edge. I'll make certain to corner him after class tomorrow." He glanced at their T.A. and sighed. "And I'll need your help."

"**Show me, coz,**" *the voice whispered.* "**Find it.**"

Corey shoved the memory to the back of his mind and concentrated on finding a comfortable place to study. The recurring memories had invaded his dreams now, and his roommate was not taking the disturbances the resulting nightmares caused well. He was glad the buildings opened an hour before the 8:00 classes; at this rate he'd be putting in a lot of study time.

His pace slowed as he neared a closed classroom door. A faint crackling filled his mind as he looked at the door, a sound that became more like laughter the longer he stood. He could almost imagine that he could see smoke seeping out from under that door.

"You, there!" a sharp voice intruded. Corey could not move; it was vital that he stay and listen to the laughter. The voice came closer. "What are you doing — Fire! Go set off the alarm! Fire!"

* * *

"According to the professor," Celia explained, with a glance aside at the security officer at the reception desk, "he just stood there, staring at the door. Security took him out when they evacuated the building, but he just kept staring at nothing until the fire was put out."

"And then he called you," J.J. said as he handed Laura a cup of coffee.

"*He called the office,*" Celia corrected him. "**I** was there. *I called as soon as I could.*"

"Can we talk to him?" Laura asked.

Celia nodded. "They're waiting for you. I explained how he's working with us —" J.J. sputtered on his coffee, "— and I've almost got them convinced to release him if we take responsibility."

"*Oh, we'll take responsibility,*" Laura said, a dangerous edge to her voice. "**If** he promises to work with us. *It's time we got to the bottom of this.*"

* * *

"Each burner will be triggered randomly," Laura explained as Celia attached electrodes to Corey's temples. She glanced past the students to the window of the sleep lab. In the main office, J.J. was setting the last wire basket over the fifth of the evenly spaced burners. He nodded behind Corey's back and Laura returned her attention to the medical readouts console before her and the student seated in front of it. "All you'll have to do is see if you can tell us which one."

Corey squirmed uncomfortably in the chair, not looking at the diagram of the five burners on the tablet before him. "How? I told you, I only hear it."

J.J., about to settle himself at the burner controls out of Corey's vision, rose and gestured to Celia to take his place. As the teaching assistant did so, J.J. pulled up a chair opposite Corey. "Just see if you can, Corey." He inclined his head to Celia.

*Flames sprang up out of the third burner. There was no sound of the flames or the gas from the burner inside the sleep lab, but Corey had jumped at the very instant the flames had appeared. Laura made note of that as well as the intense **listening** expression on his face.*

"It's right behind me," he said slowly. "I think, that one." He pointed to the second square on the paper before him.

Laura glanced at Celia. The teaching assistant nodded and shut off the burner, then turned on another.

Corey jumped again as flames shot up from the fifth burner. He took a deep breath. "That one," he repeated, now pointing to the fifth square.

They ran through several more tries with mixed success. "How are you holding up, Corey?" Laura asked after two misses in a row. Each attempt seemed to increase the student's nervousness. Perspiration now stood out on his brow and it looked to her as if only the electrodes were keeping him in the chair. "What does the fire sound like now?"

"Still ..." Corey took a deep breath, "laughing. It sounds like it's coming closer. It's not coming closer, is it?"

"No," J.J. said firmly. "No, it's not moving, Corey. Okay, it's time to try something different. Corey, I want you to remember the meditation exercise you tried. What did you do?"

Corey thought a moment. "Cleared my mind of all outside distractions. And then I was to focus on a distant point, but I was in my dorm room, so I just stared out the window."

"Good. Nice and basic." J.J. held his hand up, displaying a ring with a colorless stone. "Now, Corey, I want you to focus on this. And I want you to tell yourself that when you hear laughter, it is an outside distraction. You are not going to hear it."

"But I hear it in my mind."

"You are not going to hear it. You will only hear my voice. Focus on the ring. Clear your mind."

Corey shrugged and obediently stared at the ring. J.J. nodded, and

Laura gestured to Celia. Flames leaped from the second burner.

"Now, Corey," J.J. instructed slowly. "Point to the fire."

The student's hand slowly stirred and pointed at the second square.

Celia turned off the second burner and turned on the first.

"Again, Corey."

The finger moved from the second square to the first.

"Again."

The door to the outside corridor opened and a blonde woman in a dark blue uniform glanced inside. Laura gestured to her to take a chair and she entered, followed by a older black man. The gold braid on his uniform was a very welcome sight to Laura. They settled down to watch the test in silence.

J.J. nodded to the new arrivals as Celia continued to change burners. "Again, Corey."

Corey, his attention still on the ring, calmly pointed to the correct square.

* * *

After they had completed the same number of attempts as they had in the first trial, J.J. lowered his hand. The student blinked, his eyes falling on the office clock — more than half an hour had passed while he'd remained in the trance — unafraid of fire!

"How do you feel, Corey?" Laura asked as J.J. massaged his hand to restore circulation.

"Fine." Corey thought a moment, then suddenly smiled. "I feel fine." He laughed. "That was so **easy**. I just **knew** where the fire was."

J.J. smiled as he rose to his feet. "You did fine, Corey." He started to remove the electrodes, then stopped as the student suddenly jumped. "Corey?"

"J.J., look at the readings!" Laura exclaimed.

Corey tried not to panic as crackling laughter rose about him. He couldn't focus his thoughts, there was too much sound — "No! Give him a **city** map!" he heard a woman's voice snarl.

The crackling retreated and the lab returned around him. A woman with shoulder-length blonde hair was holding a city map under his hand. Her dark blue uniform seemed very familiar. Her blue eyes seemed to look through him, then she nodded at him and turned toward a similarly dressed man hurriedly dialing a phone. "I'd say yes; wouldn't you, Chief?"

The man looked over the top of his glasses at her, then spoke into the phone. "This is the Chief. Has a fire been reported? Where?"

Feeling confused, Corey looked for the professors and found Professor Stillman at his side. "Are you back with us now, Corey?"

"I think so. Who are these two?"

"No, that's not — what?" The man at the phone looked surprised. "When?"

The woman turned back to him. "That's the Chief; I'm Becky Fullman. We've got a lot in common, you and I." She looked closely at him. "You still hear it, don't you?"

Corey glanced at Professor Stillman for support, then nodded. "Yeah. It's faint, but still there. How did you know?"

"I told you, we've got a lot in common. I used to be able to detect fires, too. Now I just put them out."

Corey blinked as the crackling laughter in his mind seemed to hesitate. His mind filled with half-remembered images: flames and smoke around him and a bulky black sleeve, beaded with moisture, wrapped about him, carrying him; a hospital bed and a hand resting on his, a sleeve in dark blue —

The Chief put down the receiver. "Confirmed. The call came in while I was on the phone." He looked at Corey over the top of his glasses. "How did you know?"

"I ... don't know. I just ..." Corey's voice died away as he took a close look at the map. He'd never heard fire **that** far away before!

"Never mind," the Chief dismissed the question. "You probably can't explain it any more than Fullman could. Fullman, I'm assigning you as liaison to the professors."

"Chief —" the woman started, then sighed. "Yes, Chief." She looked at Professor Stillman, then smiled a small smile at Corey. "Someone's got to protect you from the shrink, here." But from the wink Professor Stillman gave him as he removed the electrodes Corey knew she and the

professor were friends.

"Actually, Chief," Professor Wingate said, leaning against a counter, "we're rather counting on you to protect us."

"Oh?" The tall man glanced at her. "From what?"

She grinned twistedly and nodded toward the door to the hallway. A half second later the door opened. "Wingate." Immediately behind the voice followed an imposing black man in an expensive suit.

"Dean Fleming," Professor Wingate greeted lightly. "We were expecting you."

"Luckily," Professor Stillman said softly to Becky, "you and the Chief arrived first." Corey looked away from the dean to glance at him and the professor smiled faintly. "Don't let him get to you; Laura and I will handle it." He rested his hand on Corey's shoulder, then rose to join his colleague.

A second man had entered almost on the heels of the first, and Corey recognized the professor who had spoken to him that morning. Although most of Corey's attention had been on the fire at the time, the stocky balding white man had made an unforgettable impression.

The dean continued as if Professor Wingate had not spoken, a faint accent of Jamaica in his phrases, "I heard Security caught the arsonist and you made them release him into your custody." He turned brusquely toward the Chief. "There was no need for Professor Wingate to involve you; campus security can handle the matter."

"I'm no —" Corey started indignantly, beginning to rise to his feet.

"Sit," Celia ordered firmly but quietly, moving quickly to his side and resting her hand on his shoulder to keep him in place. "Trust me; Dr. Wingate has things planned."

"I think you heard wrong, Fleming," the Chief countered swiftly. "This young man isn't a suspect — he's helping us with the investigation."

"I like your Chief," Celia murmured to Becky.

The blonde firefighter's attention was on her Chief, but Corey could see the pride in the small smile that was her answer to the comment.

"It's because of Corey that the fire this morning was caught before it could do any damage," Professor Wingate chimed in. "Isn't that so, Professor Sanders?"

"I ..." Sanders started, taken aback, and Corey grimaced, recognizing the type. The professor's gaze fell on Corey, and his confusion vanished. Sanders' eyes narrowed, his lips pursing in distaste. "He's the one, Dean," he said, pointing. "I found him outside the classroom. Just standing there, staring at nothing. There's no reason why he should have been there. He **must** have started the fire and then waited to see what happened."

"Waiting right outside the door?" Professor Stillman amplified skeptically. He shook his head. "Does that fit the profile of a typical arsonist, Chief?"

"No, sir," the firefighter disagreed. "Frequently arsonists will hang around to see the results of their handiwork, but they usually lose themselves in the crowd to do so."

"And there was no crowd at the time, was there? It also doesn't fit the profile of the campus firebug," Professor Stillman continued.

"But he was right outside the door," Sanders insisted.

"Of course he was," Professor Wingate agreed. "He could sense the fire."

The Dean shook his head. "Is this another of your so-called —"

"What my colleague means," Professor Stillman inserted hurriedly as Professor Wingate opened her mouth, "is that Mr. Kertiz can detect the presence of fire." He gestured at the wire baskets visible in the office. "We just finished giving a demonstration to the Chief, here."

"Oh, really," Sanders sneered. His expression indicated that he thought they all belonged in padded rooms. Celia's grip tightened on Corey's shoulder and he looked up indignantly at her. She grimaced in the man's direction, but released his shoulder.

The Chief's expression was more controlled than Celia's. "Yes, really. And I was most impressed." He turned to the dean. "You'd be wise to cooperate, Fleming. Considering all the false alarms that get turned in from the dormitories, you're lucky I'm willing to listen."

Suddenly a faint crackling laughed softly, and Corey looked around wildly. "Fire! It's in here!" he shouted, springing to his feet. He turned to Becky, who had stood when he had, and grabbed her arm. The images returned — flames and smoke and a face in an oxygen mask — but the laughter continued. "It's in here!"

"Put out that lighter, Sanders!" Professor Stillman ordered angrily.

Sanders flinched, bringing his lighter out from behind his back into Corey's view.

Corey relaxed and released the firefighter. "Sorry," he murmured. "It's okay," she told him. "I understand."

"It's an act," Sanders protested, looking from the dean to the Chief and the professors.

*"If it is, it's a very good one," the Chief said dangerously, looking over his glasses at the agitated professor. "Especially considering he detected a fire earlier halfway across the city **before** the alarm was called. A fire there is no chance he could have set, I might add." He turned to the dean. "I'm convinced he's for real, Fleming. I'm convinced enough that Fullman will be staying here to relay any information the professors and this young man are able to find. **And** I'll be informing the president of this university about this assignment."*

"It has to be an act!" Sanders repeated. "I mean — just look at him!"

The Chief, the Dean and Professor Wingate looked at Sanders instead. Corey heard a muffled noise beside him and looked to find that Celia had clapped her hands over her mouth.

The Chief turned to Professor Stillman. "You mentioned you had a profile of the campus arsonist?"

Stillman shrugged. "Just a small collection of notes."

"Good. Fullman can check it against what we have on file." He nodded to Professor Wingate. "Thank you, professors. A most impressive demonstration." He turned to Corey. "I'll be expecting to hear more from you. That's quite a useful talent you have." He nodded at Fleming on his way out the door.

Dean Fleming looked at the Chief's departing back, then turned to Sanders. "Professor, I think we need to have a talk."

* * *

*"His fear gets in the way," Laura said later, leaning forward on the edge of the wicker chair. "You saw the results." She studied her audience — J.J. leaning on the table of wire baskets and Becky seated on one of the office couches — and saw that the firefighter did not understand. "You came in during the second part of the test, Becky. He was highly accurate with meditation, but before that he could only tell **when** there was a fire." She shook her head.*

"He wasn't so precise as to where."

The firefighter glanced at the baskets. "Sounds like he was better than I was when you tried this with me."

"Different abilities," J.J. commented. "Corey said that he's always been able to sense fire. Have you sensed any since — "

"Since I talked with my father's ghost?" She shook her head. "No. And I'm glad of it. It just got in the way of doing my job. Which I should be doing now," she complained, rising to her feet, "instead of sitting around here talking with you."

"Your job includes stopping arsonists, doesn't it?" J.J. countered. She sat down again. "What have you got?"

He glanced at Laura, then went to a back corner of the office and began pulling out a display stand with a calendar and maps.

"J.J.," Becky interrupted, regarding his 'small collection of notes' with a mixture of curiosity and dismay, "how long will Celia and Corey be at the library?"

J.J. shrugged. "Corey's extra credit assignment is to write on how what he does differs from regular dowsing. Celia only has to get him started on doing the research, but with a new victim to listen to her, there's no telling," he added with a grin.

"And then she's to show him how to use our data base of paranormal reports here." Laura glanced at the door as if expecting the students to enter, then turned back to Becky. "Why?"

Becky glanced warily between them. "You said you wanted my help with Corey. Doing what?"

J.J. straightened. "He trusts you, Becky. Talk to him, get him to talk out what happened to him when he got the scar, what is happening to him now."

"Me? I'm no shrink."

"But you've gone through what he's going through now," Laura pointed out. "He needs that."

"You had Cap and the Chief to believe in you," J.J. added. "He's got you."

"And you two," Becky protested.

"We're his teachers. You're an outsider. He trusts you more." J.J. studied her. "It must be the

uniform. Probably has something to do with how he got that scar."

Becky grimaced. "Great. So I get him to confide in me. Then what?"

J.J. looked at Laura in confusion. "Then nothing. Just be his friend. He needs someone who understands."

"Well!" Becky leaned back on the couch, clearly surprised and relieved. She straightened. "And what if he turns out to be the torch?"

J.J. grinned at her. "Not possible."

"He doesn't fit the profile?" Becky persisted.

"He doesn't fit the times." J.J. pointed to the first of several red X's on the large calendar. "Look, the first fire was in mid August. Corey's a freshman; he wasn't on campus until school started in September."

"Uh, J.J.?" Laura said hesitantly. "That was the week of freshmen orientation. Corey's got one of the folders they distributed then; he **could** have been on campus."

"Oh." J.J. stared at the calendar. "Freshman orientation is in August?"

"Has been for years. You complain every time about falling over the parents that week." She paused, looking closely at the calendar. "J.J., did you notice that the first two fires were just exactly a month apart? And the one the night before Corey first stopped in was two weeks after the second fire?"

"And the fourth fire was two weeks after the third. So now it's every other week." He glanced at Laura.

"The next change is every other day," Becky added, voicing what he had left unsaid, "assuming your arsonist follows this pattern. What else makes up the pattern?"

J.J. indicated the campus map tacked beside the calendar. "The first two fires were both in the Life Sciences building —"

"That's the one we're in?" Becky interrupted.

J.J. nodded. "The third was in Medical, over here —" he pointed, "— and the fourth was back in Life Sciences. The combustibles were already at the scene — papers under a door, paper recycling

bins — nothing brought in. Fires have been set outside two offices and a lab and now inside a classroom."

"Which suggests someone without keys to the buildings, like a student." Laura paused. "But then why not the dorms or the gym?"

"Too many people about," J.J. argued. "Anyway, the office fires suggest a grudge."

Laura inclined her head in agreement. "Any links between the owners of the offices and who usually teaches in that classroom or lab?"

"Not this semester." J.J. frowned. "I'll have to check with the dean's office for last year and previous."

"Registrar's Office," Laura corrected him. She eyed Becky speculatively. "You know, it might help to have Security's reports on the fires as well. And they might talk more to an official investigator."

Becky agreed. "I'm on it."

"Done!" Laura announced. "But bring Celia along. You might need her help — for translation purposes, if nothing else." She glanced at her colleague. "It's taken years for J.J. to understand how to decipher university records."

J.J. made a face at her.

* * *

"Professor Wingate!" Celia stormed into the office, trailed by a sullen-faced Corey. She took one look at the empty desks, muttering "Never around when you need them," under her breath, then caught sight of Becky studying the charts in the back of the office. "You'll do! Would you please explain to — " She looked behind her, saw she was minus one shadow and returned to the doorway.

Becky stared curiously after her. "What's going on?" she asked Corey as he carried a load of books down the steps.

He grimaced and shook his head, his fringe of dreadlocks bobbing.

*Celia returned with a muscular young man in tow. "There, you see? She's from the fire department. And **you** think you could do a better job?"*

"Look, I told you, it's not my idea —"

Celia turned to Becky. "They've had Campus Security following us!"

The firefighter studied the embarrassed young man, who appeared to be only slightly older than Corey.
"This is Campus Security? A student?"

"Student trainee. I'm majoring in law enforcement and —"

"Save it for the walk."

"Huh?"

"I want to talk to your supervisors," Becky informed him. "You're going to take me to them."

"But I can't leave —"

Becky pulled out her identification and showed it to him. "This is an official investigation. Your supervisors should have heard from Dean Fleming and your university president by now about it and if they haven't, they will hear about it from me." She pointed toward a phone. "Call them. I want to see all the records on this case and they had better be ready as soon as we get there."

"Yes, sir! Uh, ma'am." Wide-eyed, he hurried to the phone and began dialing.

Shaking her head, Becky turned to Celia. "I'll handle this. Laura wanted you to help me get some reports from Security —"

"Say no more. I can catch up with you at Security. Corey here just needs a few instructions on the data base commands and that should take all of five minutes. Aye, Mr. LaForge?"

Corey grinned and seated himself at Laura's terminal. "Aye, aye, Mr. Scott."

* * *

"It took a bit of digging," J.J. explained, pausing to snag a pea pod with his chopsticks, "but I finally managed to match the offices, the lab and the classroom." He waited a moment. "I had to go back four years," he added, prodding for a reaction.

"Dining in?" Becky stood in the office doorway and eyed the numerous small white cartons of takeout Chinese food.

"We get more done this way." Laura gestured with her chopsticks as Becky weaved her way amid suitcases, backpacks and stacks of books inside the doors to reach the steps. "We got you some sesame chicken. Extra rice is over by Corey. So're the forks. J.J. just found a possible victim. So, who did you go back four years to find, J.J.?"

"Dr. Jacob Phillips. He hasn't used the lab in four years, since he changed some of his classes. And four years ago that second office was his T.A.'s."

"His teaching assistant had her own office?" Celia demanded indignantly.

"Jake?" Laura protested. "Why would anyone pick on Jake?"

J.J. shrugged. "We'll just ask him."

"That's going to be a bit difficult, J.J. Jake's on sabbatical this year." Laura glanced at the large marked calendar. "He should be in Amsterdam right now."

"He's not even on campus?" Becky asked, looking up from her carton.

"Don't look so disappointed, J.J.," Laura said. "That just proves the firebug isn't someone from the university. Everyone here — except you, J.J. — knows Jake's gone all year. Did you find out anything interesting, Becky?"

"Security had a bit more of the pattern. Each of the four fires have been set either in the early morning or late evening. They had lists of names and descriptions of everyone they saw in the areas at the times of the fires — no matches. They did have one interesting note and I decided to check our records back at the station, otherwise I would have been back sooner." She put down her box and retrieved her notebook, flipping quickly through the pages. "Security had a note on an off-campus fire in July, at the home of a —" she paused and looked again at the name, "— Professor Jacob Phillips."

"When in July?" J.J. hurried to the calendar.

"The 18th." She went on as J.J. added an 'X' to the calendar.

"The neighbors spotted the fire before it did too much damage, and the police department was alerted to make additional sweeps since the professor was going to be out of town for awhile."

"Exactly one month before the fires started on campus," J.J. confirmed. "The same person. It has to be."

"So, where does that leave us?" Laura asked.

Celia made a sour face. "I vote we dump all this on Security and let them dig through Dr. Phillips' old class lists. He's been on campus forever!"

J.J. paused, chopsticks poised. "What would they look for, Celia?"

"I don't know. **You're** the psychiatrist."

"You think the torch is a former student?" Becky asked.

"A student or an ex-employee. It seems to fit." Laura put her carton down. "Who else would know the offices, the lab, and the classrooms Jake used to use four years ago and yet not know he isn't here this year?" She paused. "I said classrooms. J.J., did you get a list of all the classrooms Jake taught in?"

"No, I was just trying to find a match for what we had. Why?"

"Because Celia's right. We don't know if this person knew Jake from four years ago or longer still. Jake's been here a long time and has taught in a lot of classrooms. Including what became this office."

J.J. nodded thoughtfully. "Well, then, it's a good thing Corey and I will be camping out in the sleep lab tonight. Since we've all decided that the torch might shift the pattern to every other day," he told Becky, "Laura and I thought the best alibi for Corey would be if he's here."

"Especially with Sanders around," Celia added. "He's the one who set Security on Corey in the first place."

"Security didn't mention that to me." Becky glanced at Corey, who shrugged at her.

J.J. shook his head. "Security wouldn't. Professional nonbias and all that. But, you and Celia did find out that the torch usually sets the fires in early morning or late evening, which means Corey doesn't have to skip any more classes."

"I just have to move in here until they catch this guy." Corey glanced toward the doors and Becky realized who was the owner of the suitcases-and-backpacks obstacle course.

"Or until we get Sanders off your case," Celia amended, "and that won't take too long."

"Oh no?" Corey gestured at the calendar. "Since we had a fire today —"

"They think it was set late last night," Becky inserted. "Poor choice of combustibles."

Corey recalculated. "— the next one might be tomorrow evening, or the morning after, or the evening after. Or even the week after next!"

"Which gives you plenty of time to work on your extra credit paper," J.J. pointed out, "since you'll have easy access to the data base."

"Oh." Grinning, Corey exchanged glances with Celia, then looked almost possessively at the terminal on Laura's desk. Laura nodded to herself. A definite Parapsychology major in the making. "What does your Security say about this plan?" Becky asked.

Laura grinned. "We thought we'd let the official investigator tell them."

Becky sighed. "Can I tell them what we've discovered?"

"Sure." J.J. smiled conspiratorily at Corey and Laura. "If they let us have a walkie-talkie, we can even let them know the second we know about a fire."

Becky glanced at the walkie-talkie Security had given her and looked suspiciously at Celia, who was doing her best to look elsewhere.

"We've got room for more," Laura suggested.

Becky frowned at the department chair. "You're going to be in this 'campout', too?"

"Wouldn't miss it. But Celia and I will be joining tomorrow night."

Becky sighed. "Okay, tomorrow night."

"Great!" *Laura disposed of her carton, then started up the steps to her desk. "Now that that's settled, I need to get **some** work done while I still have access to my computer."*

"Uh, Professor Wingate?" Corey asked hesitantly. "Could I use your computer tonight to work on my English paper?"

* * *

Corey yawned widely as he stared at the computer screen. "Get some sleep, Corey," J.J. suggested, glancing up from his stack of student papers. "The sleep lab is all yours; I'll be at this

awhile and I'm used to the couches in here."

Corey rubbed his eyes and glanced at his watch. Ten o'clock. "No, that's okay. I just haven't been getting much sleep lately. Been having nightmares the last few nights."

"About fire?" J.J. asked casually.

Corey nodded. "About when I got this —" he rubbed his scar. "The thing is, I never really remembered much about what happened. And now I keep seeing bits and pieces."

"What **did** happen?"

"My mom told me we were visiting my aunt. One of my cousins decided to play with matches — at least that's what the firefighters told her. The fire killed my cousins and my aunt, but the firefighters saved me." Corey shook his head. "I don't even remember what my cousins looked like."

"Some people can't remember much of what happened when they were five. What do you remember now?"

Corey sighed and looked into his memory. "Kids screaming. The firefighters — I can even see the sleeve of the one who carried me out. Flames and smoke. Waking up in the hospital bed." He raised his hand to his scar again. "Pain. And ... a voice."

"Whose voice? What does it say?"

Corey shook his head. "I don't remember who. And it just says, 'Show me, coz.' Over and over again." He looked up and wondered when Professor Stillman had crossed the room to stand by the desk.

"Do you think it might be the voice of one of your cousins?"

"It could be. It must be. And 'show me' — do you think they were testing my sense of fire? Do you think that's what caused the fire?" He stared at J.J., his eyes stricken. "A dumb kid's game?"

"And you started remembering this when? Before or after you came to us? After?" At Corey's nod, J.J. sat in a chair beside the desk. "Then that's it. Our testing reminded you of your cousins' tests and now you're remembering what you forgot."

Corey closed his eyes a moment. When he opened them, his voice was normal again. "But what about the laughter? Why do I feel that fire is laughing at me? It doesn't sound human, not like the

voice, so it's not the ghost of my cousin, like Becky, I mean, Miss Fullman's father."

"Ah. You've read her file in the data base."

Corey nodded. "She talked to me about it, too, just to let me know that I'm not the only one who's ever been blamed for causing fires. She had it rough, with her father being a torch and all."

"Yeah, she did." The professor grinned suddenly. "Did she tell you that when Laura tested her, she tried to put out the fire with her bare hands?" When Corey stared at him, he continued, "She didn't repeat what the fire was saying to her at the time, but that was her response."

Corey stared at the wire baskets and could almost see the blonde firefighter throttling a flame. "I'm not that brave." He took a deep breath. "Celia said I should just ask you to hypnotize me — give me a posthypnotic suggestion to control my fear."

"Celia." *J.J. looked upwards with a sigh, then rubbed the back of his neck. "It doesn't always work that way, Corey. With a fear as deep-seated as yours, all I can do is take the edge off it, let you see past it. **You** have to take control. And you have been. Remember how well you did detecting fire when you meditated?"*

"I did, didn't I?" Corey agreed.

"We can run through a few meditation exercises tonight, see which ones you are more comfortable with." J.J. studied the computer screen. "Hey, you're almost done with your extra credit paper! Good job!"

Corey looked at his conclusion with a mixture of pride and disappointment. "Yeah, but I can't prove it."

"Prove what?"

"Well, I've determined —"

"You've definitely been hanging around Celia too long," the professor groaned.

Corey glanced curiously at him. "— after going through all the literature on dowsing and all the reported cases, that my ability isn't too different from regular dowsing. So anyone should be able to do it."

"With the proper frame of mind." J.J. looked at the counter of wire baskets. "While we're all waiting tomorrow evening, I have an idea for a little test."

* * *

"I don't like this!" Becky said as Laura attached the electrodes to her temples. She twisted to glare at Corey, who was seated beside her and also festooned with electrodes. "I don't care if it **was** your idea!"

Laura smiled reassuringly. "It's nothing too different from what you've done before, Becky. Corey and J.J. just decided that, with your previous affinity to fire, you'd be the best choice."

"Please?" Corey asked. "It would really help my paper."

Becky looked searchingly at him, then closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh, all right." She opened her eyes to glare at J.J. "But only a few times. That's all." Corey grinned at her and she sighed again. "What do I do?"

"We hold hands," Corey said, extending his.

She closed her hand about his but had to ask, "Why?"

"This is just a basic test," J.J. said, settling himself opposite them, "to see if direct contact might help trigger the ability."

"It won't be so bad," Corey reassured her. "You see, unlike your previous ability, where you actually saw the fire and its surroundings, I just **know** where fire is. That's all dowsing is — an awareness of a particular substance."

J.J. held up his ring. "Corey is going to meditate, to close out any outside distractions — including the laughter, Corey. Becky, you can do the same, or simply close your eyes and try to think of nothing."

Becky closed her eyes. "And then what?"

"I'll ask you to tell me where the fire is. The diagram is right under your hand, Becky. Tell me where the fire is...now."

*This was ridiculous, Becky told herself. She wasn't going to be able to detect fire, any more than she had the last time she had tried this test. It wasn't something you could turn off and on like ... A roaring **whoosh** suddenly sounded behind her and she shot to her feet, slamming her hand down on the table as she rose.*

"You did it!" Laura beamed at her. J.J. seemed stunned.

Becky stared at Laura, then looked down at her hand. It was covering the second diagram and,

turning, she could see the burner in the second basket blazing silently.

Corey blinked. "You let go," he said accusingly.

Becky looked from her hand to the fire. "It ... took me by surprise." She sat down and grasped Corey's hand. "I want to try that again."

She closed her eyes and shut out the sound of J.J. talking to Corey. The roar of the flames was already there in her mind, but it seemed fainter this time, more distant. She reached out for the diagram, then paused. No, that wasn't it. She pawed across the table, blindly seeking something that felt right in her hand. When she did, she opened her eyes and found that what she was pointing at was not the diagram but instead a rough floorplan of the Life Sciences building.

"He's here," J.J. said, glancing at his watch. "Quarter to ten. The night classes will be letting out soon. If we pull the fire alarm, we could lose him in the crowd."

"No." Becky pulled the electrodes off herself.

Laura caught up one of the fire extinguishers by the door to the office. "We'll let Security decide." She glanced at the floorplan. "Celia, tell them it's Room 408." As Celia spoke into the walkie-talkie, Laura continued, "J.J., you and Corey had better stay here. Becky, it's two floors up and across the building from here."

"I'm on it." Standing, Becky shook her head to clear it, then turned to Celia. "I'll need the walkie-talkie." She thumbed it as soon as it was in her grasp. "This is Fullman. We're heading out to the fire. I'll relay what we find if we get there first."

"Roger," came the brisk reply.

"Hey, what about me?" Celia asked as Laura and Becky went through the office and out the doors.

"Get me the smelling salts!" J.J. ordered. "Corey!" He caught the student as Corey slumped forward.

* * *

As quick as they were, there was no one in the hallway as they neared Room 408. "He's repeating himself," Laura commented, pointing out the burn at the bottom of the office door.

Becky tried the knob. "Locked," she commented. The door had several panes of frosted glass in the upper quarter. One was broken, and she looked through the small opening. Thumbing the

walkie-talkie, she relayed, "The fire is confined to the top of the desk at the moment. The door is locked. If you don't get here soon with a key, I'm going to have to break in."

* * *

"Those sudden breaks in contact are why you're so dizzy, Corey," J.J. said reassuringly, as he sat back on his heels. "Just give yourself a moment to recover. Oh, and congratulations on a successful experiment."

"It worked, didn't it," Corey said wonderingly. He laid back on the floor and looked fuzzily at the ceiling.

"Careful," Celia warned as she placed the remaining electrodes atop the console, "you still might get stuck writing up the report on the experiment."

"True," J.J. commented. "A good researcher always does his — or her —" he nodded to Celia, "— own followup. But this time, Celia will help you."

Celia nodded sagely. "What did I tell you? Hey!" She glared at J.J. as his words sank in.

J.J. ignored her, glancing instead at the office doors. "The hard part might be getting Becky to give you her full impressions of the experiment," he mused.

Corey sat up. "Do you smell smoke?" Climbing to his feet with J.J.'s assistance, he looked through the window at the burners.

Celia sniffed. "I don't smell any smoke."

J.J. watched him. "Are you still aware of the fire, Corey?"

He nodded. "But there's something else, something faintly crackling and smoky ... and moving! It's coming for me!"

J.J. caught him. "No, Corey! That's the five-year-old talking. Fire is not coming for you. You're sensing something else."

Corey shook his head in an attempt to straighten out his impressions. "Yeah. Something connected with fire."

"He's sensing the torch!" Celia guessed.

"I think so," J.J. agreed. "Corey, where is he?"

Corey turned to the table and stared at the floorplan. "About here," he said, pointing.

"On this floor," J.J. observed. "That's why you can sense him. Celia, take the closest stairs. Go warn Laura and Becky. Get Security down here."

Celia started toward the door, then stopped. "But what are you going to do?"

J.J. glanced again at the floorplan. "We're going to find him. Right, Corey?"

Corey stiffened, his eyes widening. He caught Celia's arm as she started again for the door. "No! He's coming closer! He's coming here!"

"But there aren't any stairs in this end of the floor," Celia countered. "Why would he be coming here?"

"He's changing the pattern!" J.J. surmised. He examined the floorplan. "Yes! Look, he already tried burning Room 408 back in August."

"So why do it again?" Celia asked.

"You can ask him yourself," Corey suggested, staring through the window of the lab out at the office doors. "He's just about at the doors."

"He's what?" J.J. looked towards the frosted glass of the office doors. "Get down!" he ordered as a faint shadow became visible.

They crouched below the level of the window. Seconds ticked by, then Corey whispered, "He's very close. He must be in the office."

"Okay," J.J. said softly, "I'm going to go out that door —" he pointed to the door leading to the hallway, "— and come around to the office doors. Celia, you work your way to the phone and call Security."

They all jumped as the building's fire alarm suddenly sounded. "It's from the other fire," Corey whispered under the noise. "He hasn't started one here yet."

"We're ready when he does," Celia reminded him, indicating the remaining fire extinguishers by the burner controls.

Through the lab door, left open when Laura and Becky had departed, they could hear the scrape of moving furniture. J.J. clapped Corey on the shoulder. "You be ready for fire, too," he ordered. Corey nodded, and J.J. began edging his way to the door at the back of the lab, careful to keep the lab's furnishings between himself and the window.

"I hope he remembers to unlock the door first," Celia muttered.

* * *

Laura watched through the door as Becky and a member of Security blanketed the desktop with clouds of chemical extinguisher. The computer looked like it was going to be a total loss. The fire alarm, triggered by smoke detectors when Security had unlocked the door, buzzed overhead. "How did he start the fire from out here?" she wondered aloud.

"No **normal** person could," the Security officer beside her commented.

"But someone who could start fires with his mind could. Where was our suspect?"

Laura bristled, but Becky, having satisfied herself that the fire was out, had also heard and stepped in first. "There's no mystery about how this was done." She glanced from the broken pane to the desk. "I suggest you concentrate on finding something about —" she measured with her hands, "— this long —" She paused, her blue eyes widening as she stared into space.

"Becky?" Laura asked, concerned. She suddenly realized what was happening. "Becky, what do you see?"

Becky's voice was distant. "He's started another fire."

Laura caught up the fire extinguisher Becky had put down. "Can you tell me where, Becky? Describe what you see."

*The firefighter shook her head, and her eyes seemed to see Laura again. "The office. **Your** office." She caught Laura's arm. "What did he do to me? I don't need this ability again!"*

Static crackled from the walkie-talkie at her hip. "Base here. We've got a call about the arsonist. Woman says he's in the Department of Parapsychology office."

Laura shook herself free from the taller woman's grasp. "Take that up with us later. Right now we've got another fire."

"Yeah, and we know who started it," the Security officer muttered.

* * *

"Yes, it's me again," Celia snapped into the phone. "The arsonist is now in the hallway — and if you guys don't hurry up he'll be out of the building!"

Corey stood in the lab doorway, staring at the fire greedily licking the fabric of the couch. Images flashed through his mind: two young black boys — one somehow taller than himself, the other his height — both very familiar, the toy-strewn interior of an apartment, a blazing couch. His grip tightened on the fire extinguisher Celia had pushed into his hands.

"No, I'm not going to try to stop him," Celia argued behind him, still on the phone. "I've got a fire to put out here!"

"Daniel," Corey said slowly, pulling the name out of the fire's laughter. "Andy. The fire is in the couch. That's where you hid it." The fire's crackling laughter surged upwards, as the flames swept up the back of the couch in the office just as it had done to the couch in his memory, taunting him with his inability to move. Something stirred within him in response to the laughter, a swirl of anger he'd never felt before.

The crackling laughter in his mind seemed to hesitate as the anger grew. He became aware of cool metal filling his hands. Corey looked blankly at the fire extinguisher in his arms, the trigger placed precisely in his hand. He looked at the flame covered couch, heard the mocking laughter of the fire, and the anger within him snarled in response. He squeezed the controls.

* * *

"I'm not going to hurt you," J.J. repeated, holding his empty hands up where the torch could see them. He resisted the impulse to glance again through the partly closed office doors behind the man. The last glimpse he had, Corey was standing staring at the fire and Celia was nowhere to be seen. He concentrated on reading the face and body language of the man before him, hoping at the same time that Celia had reached Security and that reinforcements were on the way. "I just want to talk to you."

"Oh?" The man looked down the empty hallway then slyly back at J.J. "What about?"

"About ... fires," J.J. drawled out, his tone steady and calming. He was very glad that the still buzzing fire alarm had cleared out the normal end-of-class hallway confusion faster than usual. He didn't like the glitter in this man's eyes.

The man chuckled. "Oh, is that what that racket is all about? No, I'm just here for a night class."

From his casual attire, he could be a student, although his apparent age suggested either a graduate student or simply one of the older, nontraditional students.

J.J. studied the rain-wet jacket that should have been dry after a two-hour class but decided to comment on something more obvious. "Where are your books? Don't you find it hard to keep notes without even a notebook?"

The man glared at him. "I keep excellent notes. I keep my notes —" he gestured toward his forehead, "— up here."

"I see," J.J. commented. "Did you get good grades that way?"

The casual question struck a nerve. "What do you know about my grades?" the arsonist demanded. "You talked to my boss, didn't you. Well, I'll show him. Giving me an 'F'. He can't do that."

"Your boss?" J.J. asked in confusion.

"No, not my boss. Phillips! Where is he? I've been looking for him in all his usual places. He's hiding from me, isn't he? Afraid to face me."

"Phillips gave you an 'F'?" J.J. deciphered. This didn't fit the Jake he'd been hearing about lately from Laura and Celia. This student's work must have been pretty bad to have earned an 'F' from easy-going Phillips. "Couldn't you have done some extra credit work?"

"You don't understand," the torch sneered. "He flunked me. He branded me a failure. Nobody wants to hire a failure. He has to change my grade!"

"I thought you said you had a job."

The man blinked. "Of course I have a job," he said in a different voice.

"Then why are you setting the fires?" J.J. asked slowly.

"Don't you understand? If he doesn't change that 'F', then my records must be purified. Nobody wants to hire a failure," he repeated distantly. Drawing a lighter from his jacket pocket, he lit it and studied the yellow flame. Adjusting the flame higher, he raised his gaze to J.J. and smiled.

Suddenly one of the office doors swung outward, slamming into the torch's side and sending him stumbling toward the opposite wall. J.J., surprised, turned to find Corey standing in the doorway, holding a fire extinguisher pointed at the floor before the slightly stunned torch. "Corey?" he

marvelled, wondering at the change in the student.

"Geeze, Corey, it's only a lighter," Celia said from behind the freshman. J.J. looked to see what Corey was aiming at and was amused and reassured to see that the lighter, its flame having gone out when it was dropped, and not the torch was the focus of Corey's attention.

The torch, however, either didn't notice or was misled by Corey's intense expression. He flattened himself against the wall and raised empty hands. "Hey, be careful with that," he urged.

Movement at the end of the hallway caught J.J.'s attention. "Took them long enough," Celia commented as the Security people hurried towards them. "Laura looks worried, but Becky looks really angry. I wonder what happened?"

"We'll find out soon enough," J.J. replied pensively. He looked from Corey to Becky and realized where he had seen the expression on the freshman's face before.

"I called the Chief," Celia told the firefighter as she and Laura joined them. "He's on his way."

Becky waited as Security took charge of the torch and started down the hallway with him, trailing protests of "Where's Phillips? I have to talk to Dr. Phillips!" in their wake. Then she turned on J.J. and Corey. "What did you do to me?!" she demanded.

* * *

*"As near as I can tell without further testing," J.J. decided, studying the readouts, "contact with Corey re-activated your abilities. The readings are the same as when you first came to us." He rubbed his eyes. "Contact with **you**, on the other hand, awakened another ability in Corey. He could sense the torch. Something of your attitude towards fire also seems to have been picked up — unless you were practicing a new meditation exercise, Corey?"*

Corey shook his head vigorously, sending his dreadlocks bouncing. "Not me! I couldn't close it out of my mind at all! And the memories — when I saw the couch on fire I remembered everything from when this —" he pointed at the scar, "— happened. Everything! My cousins, their names — they hid the fire they were testing me with inside the couch ..." He fell silent as he looked again at the burned ruin inside the office.

*"But **you** put out the fire, Corey," Laura reminded him. She gestured at the rest of the untouched office. "If meditation didn't help you, then how were you able to move against the fire?"*

The student shrugged in confusion. "I ... guess I got angry."

"Angry!" Celia repeated. "That's like saying Rambo was upset."

"I remember Celia giving me the extinguisher. I remember staring at the fire." He looked down at his hands. "I don't know where the anger came from. I've never felt that way before — it was like the fire was something I had to kill."

"That sounds like Fullman, all right," the Chief said from the open doorway. "She kills fires. So you picked up some of her attitude and now you can sense torches. That's a very impressive talent you have."

Laura shook her head. "No need to ask how long you've been standing there." The phone rang, and she headed for the closet. "It's probably Security wondering why we haven't turned up to give our statements. Yes," she said into the receiver, "he's finally arrived, so we'll be right over."

"Statements?" the Chief asked. "You caught him?"

Becky nodded. "Corey and J.J. did. Corey put out the fire the torch started here."

The Chief walked over to the lab window to stare at the blackened couch. "I think I'm going to enjoy making Fleming realize just how wrong he can be."

* * *

"So, the torch actually did graduate from here?" Celia asked a few days later.

J.J. nodded. "Five years ago. Name's Bob Wilson. According to his medical records, he's been diagnosed schizophrenic. That will probably be taken into consideration at his trial." He joined in the applause of the Parapsychology students as Corey and Becky entered the office. "How did the award ceremony go?"

The two glanced at each other as Celia handed them glasses of punch, and Becky shrugged. "It went all right. The Chief was paged in the middle of the mayor's talk and I'm not sure if anyone understood what your president talked about —"

"Nobody ever does," Laura said drily.

"Oh. But Dean Fleming gave a very nice introduction — and an apology — for Corey."

Corey grinned. "He said I was an inspiration to students on civic duty." He glanced at the table of food. "Nice cake! They spelled my name right."

"So let's see the letter of commendation," Celia prompted.

Blushing, Corey handed her the framed letter. "They should have given it to you," he said. "Me?" She scanned the letter. "It says 'for courage and quick thinking' — nope, nothing here about arguing on the phone." Other students crowded around her to admire the award.

Laura raised her glass to him. "It's never any good arguing with Celia."

Corey grinned. "I think the Chief wants me to join the fire department after I graduate," he said, watching as the award got passed to another group. "He said a Parapsychology major would be okay."

*"If that's what you want," Laura said, pleased at his choice of major. Sometimes you **could** predict a possible major from the first reaction to the office.*