

Point of Origin
by Catherine Wells

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Ozzie was hip deep in paperwork when Dispatch called. "We need an investigator for a wildland fire."

His heart contracted. *Fire all around them, on both sides of the ravine, trees exploding like gas jets, flames shooting a hundred feet into the air*— Ozzie drew a deep breath to push back the incipient panic. "What fire is that?"

It was called the Matchless Fire, and so far it had destroyed eighty acres. Ozzie protested at being sent out to investigate its source; DWR wasn't supposed to get involved until a fire hit one hundred acres, or until interagency resources were called in. But Dispatch was adamant. "The investigator on the scene is calling for roadblocks," she told him. "You know what that means." Ozzie knew. It meant the fire had been set intentionally; it meant they might be looking at another terror attack.

Grimly, Ozzie collected all the available data on the Matchless Fire: satellite photos, infrared scans, topo maps, vegetation distribution. Everything the Incident Commander had to manage the wildfire suppression efforts was at Ozzie's fingertips. To it he added reports on other fires in the region, historical fire data, and evidence scanned in by the on-scene investigator, and he fed it all into ICCARUS, the Incident Command, Control And Reconnaissance Utility Software. The powerful integration software was designed specifically for fire management; it chewed the data, parsed it, collated and indexed it, applied algorithms and heuristics, and spat it back out as whole cloth.

All the way out to the scene, Ozzie's laptop unit spoke rationally to him of established facts, regional patterns, and percentages of probability, so by the time he pulled onto the last two-mile stretch of four-wheel drive road, he was ready to dispute the on-scene investigator. In fact, he was ready to castigate the on-scene investigator. This fire might have been human-caused, but not by a terrorist, and certainly not by anyone who might still be caught in a roadblock. It had been burning for at least eighteen hours; that was plenty of time for the perpetrator to flee.

A Forest Service pickup, painted its peculiar shade of sea green, was parked on the road in a low spot between two north-south ridges. Matchless Mesa rose up to the south, casting almost no shadow at this time of year. Late June was the worst time for wildland fires in Arizona: any spring runoff had long since evaporated, and

the relentless sun raised mid-day temperatures, even in this mountainous country, to ninety degrees. If this was an intentional fire, the perp had picked the most damaging season to start it.

Ozzie pulled his truck in behind the Forest Service pickup and drew a deep breath. A trace of smoke reached him and his heart lurched, spurred by the adrenalin that surged into his blood. *Smoke so thick he couldn't breathe, choking, gasping, sucking in air that held no oxygen*— Ozzie gave himself a physical shake to break the effect. He had been out in the field a number of times since coming back to work three months ago, but not where he could smell smoke. He took another deep breath, fighting the irrational sensation of suffocation. Of course he could breathe. Of course the air was good. It was only the residual smell of woodsmoke; the fire had cleared this area last night, and a mop-up crew had been in already to make sure everything was cold dead. He could see them through the trees, upslope to the east, digging through the ash, methodically dousing every hotspot. Only the point of origin had been cordoned off, protected, until the investigation was through.

So Ozzie would meet with the investigator, establish the facts, and the mop-up crew could finish here. Gathering up his fire gloves and helmet, Ozzie looked around for his man.

Off to the right, about twenty yards from the road, a figure in fire gear stood placidly gazing up into the treetops, its back toward him. Ozzie checked the integrator for a name: Fuels Specialist Carol Ellison, Forest Service. Huh. Probably some newbie just out of college. He climbed stiffly out of the truck and slammed his door behind him.

Ellison didn't even glance in his direction. Ozzie scowled. It was a rare ranger who showed much respect for a DWR man, but it still irked him. She could at least acknowledge his presence. What was she studying, up there in the treetops? He stole a glance at them: junipers and pinyons mostly, with a couple of Apache pines and some Emory oaks, all widely spaced here on the arid slope of the Mogollon Rim. That towering wall of rock reared up just a couple of miles to the north, a two thousand foot upthrust marking the edge of the Colorado Plateau.

A breeze tugged at the fabric of Ozzie's yellow brush coat, and he thought how lucky it was that yesterday's gusty winds were dying out, and that cooler air was moving into the region. Had the weather gods been less kind, this would be a much bigger fire. Most of the country above and below the Rim was heavily forested, in spite of devastating fires in the first decade of the century. New growth was denser than old growth, and spindly like kindling. A stiff wind could push the fire from the surface up into the crowns, where it could grow by hundreds of acres in a single day.

In fact, right where Ellison was staring, the crowns were partially blackened. The fire had jumped into the canopy right here, at its supposed starting point—highly unusual. It made Ozzie question whether this was actually the point of

origin. She probably had that wrong, too.

Irritated, he called to her. “Ellison?”

Without turning, she waved him over. Ozzie cursed under his breath, then gritted his teeth and limped slowly toward her, choosing his path carefully. There had been no fire between the road—if you could call two tracks in the dust a road—and where she stood; maybe it really had started here. Certainly the satellite photos had pinpointed this area as the starting point, but the fire had already been half an acre in size before the first image was taken, so that allowed some latitude. Ozzie watched where he stepped, careful not to disturb any evidence as he approached the forester. The smell of smoke was more intense here.

Ellison was tall for a woman, maybe five-ten, which gave her the impression of being lean, even in her baggy fire gear. “Footprints are over there,” she said as he drew near, waving a hand to her left without taking her eyes off the pinyon she was studying. “I scanned them in, along with the tire tracks. See what you think.”

Her voice was low and a bit scratchy—not the voice of a girl fresh out of college. And her fire gear bore traces of long use: nicks on the helmet, a worn look to the dark green trousers and bright yellow shirt, ground-in dirt on the boots. Okay, not a newbie. Just stupid, then. Ozzie detoured to his left and found the marks she had indicated.

“Tires are Michelin QX series,” he told her, peering down at the prints and debating the wisdom of squatting for a closer look. The skin on the backs of his legs was still new and not very forgiving. “Popular for off-road vehicles manufactured since 2019. Shoes are more distinctive these days; this is a size ten Fleetfoot Trackhacker.”

At that she turned and pushed back a pair of lightweight multifunction goggles she’d been gazing through. Like his own, they provided magnification, filters, shadow-enhanced monochrome, and infrared vision. It surprised Ozzie that she had a pair; district personnel didn’t usually have that kind of equipment. It also surprised him to see the faint lines around her eyes and nose, the beginning of slackness in the skin along her jaw, the graying blond hair protruding in untidy wisps from beneath her hard hat. The woman had to be fifty, at least. “You ran the prints?” she asked.

Ozzie snorted. “No, I eyeballed them and came up with that. Of course, I ran the prints.” The print-recognition database had produced product IDs almost instantly, and Ozzie had forwarded that information to officers at the hastily established roadblocks before he loaded it into ICCARUS. They would be on the lookout for an ORV and a man with a cut in the left heel of his Fleetfoot Trackhackers.

Knowing he would regret it, Ozzie squatted down to examine the marks in the dust. Across the backs of his thighs and knees, new nerves shrieked at the unaccustomed strain, but he told himself it was just like physical therapy. In fact, it

was a lot less painful than much of his physical therapy. “Just one person, you’re right about that,” he decided. “Scuffs his left foot when he walks. A big man, or else carrying a heavy pack.” *Or a big woman, with a size ten foot.*

Ellison had come to stand behind him, looking over his shoulder at the tracks. “Flamethrower,” she said.

Ozzie looked up, startled. “What?”

Her mouth quirked in amusement at his reaction, and suddenly Ozzie realized what he was dealing with: old-time Forest Service. They were all so damned arrogant, the old-timers, and they resented the hell out of the DWR. Nothing pleased them more than to make “Dee-Dubs,” as they called them, look foolish.

Not me, lady. I’ve paid my dues. Been to hell and lived to tell.

“Carrying a flamethrower,” the woman elaborated. “This guy wasn’t the least bit subtle. No wimpy little cigarette lighter, or a match dropped in a thicket of dried sage.” She waved a hand at the canopy of pines. “He went straight for the crowns.”

Fire in the crowns, tearing up the ravine toward them, and no safety zone, nowhere to run—

Ozzie fought down a shudder and turned his attention back to the charred pinyon pine and the woman with the mocking blue eyes. A flamethrower—It was a terrorist tool. In 2007, they had hit eighteen National Forests and six National Parks in the western United States in a one-week period, using flamethrowers and Molotov cocktails. Over three million acres had burned, including whole towns. Fires in the suburbs of Denver had outstripped the supply of water to douse them, and a hundred thousand homes had burned. “That would be why you called for roadblocks,” he guessed.

“Yup.”

So maybe she wasn’t stupid. Carefully, Ozzie straightened himself up, resisting the urge to shake out his legs to relieve the sensations crackling in his new skin. He was no taller than Ellison, but his shoulders were considerably broader, and he expanded his chest unconsciously to enhance the effect. He was in charge here now, and she had better understand that. “You knew when you called for roadblocks, they’d send in a DWR investigator.” He pronounced it “Doo-Wer,” the favored pronunciation in the Department itself.

Her smile broadened, surprising him. “Knew? I begged them to send you,” she said cheerfully. “Do you know how hard it is to get roadblocks when your fire is eighteen hours old?”

Not stupid, then. Not stupid at all. But like most old-time rangers, she hadn’t told him everything. ICCARUS was missing a few data, little things like, oh, a flamethrower. But what else? Why put up roadblocks when the perp was likely long

gone?

“This is where the fire started,” she went on, turning back to the pine she’d been studying when he arrived. “You can see how the lower branches are incinerated.” The lowest branches were fifteen feet above the ground; this patch of forest had been well-thinned, whether mechanically or by previous fires, and there were no shrubs or vines in the six-to-twelve-foot range. Fire could not have jumped from the surface to those lowest branches without intervening “ladder” fuels. “But the tree is so green, it didn’t light off very well. The top is unburned.

“Some of the debris fell down here on the ground, though—” She pointed to the burned area around the base of the tree. “—and got a surface fire going. Must have been disappointing as hell for him, not to have these big trees go up like torches.”

Ozzie surveyed the area carefully, with his own vision first, then with his goggles. The way the grass had fallen, the location of scorch marks and unburned patches, all supported her thesis. The surface fire had started here beneath the torched pinyon, and the southwesterly breeze had kept it from backing toward the road. He even agreed, reluctantly, with her suspicion that a flamethrower had been used on the pine; it was too green for lightning to have scorched it this way. Flame had been applied.

And the flame had spread. Driven by yesterday’s brisk winds, it had moved into rough terrain and was now burning toward a campground and a dozen rental cabins. If firefighters couldn’t stop it there, chances were good it would burn right up the canyon and threaten a four-star resort.

“If it was a terrorist,” Ozzie said carefully, “why isn’t he somewhere else starting more fires? There’s been no jump in the number of initial attacks in this zone.” Every response to a wildland fire was called an initial attack, even if the size-up team decided the fire should not be suppressed. “And no sign of coordination between this fire and others.”

“It’s not a terrorist,” Ellison said flatly. “And he’s not somewhere else because he’s still here, somewhere. Maybe sitting up on that ridge.” She waved a hand to the west. “Or on the mesa behind us. Watching his handiwork.”

The hair on the back of Ozzie’s neck lifted; she was awfully damn sure of herself. “What makes you say that?” he asked.

For a moment she chewed on her lip, the only hesitant behavior he had seen her display since he came. “Because I’ve seen this MO before,” she said finally. “This guy’s an arsonist, not a terrorist. He likes fire. He likes to watch.”

The flames were captivating: Nature’s pyrotechnic display. Munching MREs—“Meals Ready to Eat”—the newbies watched gape-mouthed as gouts of red-orange flame churned into the air along the ridge. Some pulled digital

cameras from their pockets and took snapshots. But then the wind shifted, and instead of spectators in the bleachers, they were suddenly center stage...

Ozzie rubbed his neck to erase the chill and switched his goggles from infrared to enhanced-shadow monochrome as he went back to study the tracks again, this time following their route. The perp had torched several trees, trying to enlarge the fire. His scuffed footprints were around the trunks, and then he went—where? Back to his vehicle, which he had parked off the road, under a juniper. Hiding from the satellites? He could have saved himself the trouble. By the time the fire registered on Firebird, and it signaled Scooter to move in for a closer look, the perp could have been well down the road, lost among the other vehicles that traversed the forest. A terrorist would have hit and run, hoping to start another fire further up the road to complicate matters, or maybe get to another forest and start one there. But if Ellison was right...

Ozzie tapped the interface in the sleeve of his brush jacket to activate it, then called up the first satellite photos. Zeroing in on the point of origin, he struggled to make out fine detail on the three-inch by four-inch screen. The image was grainy, but it was possible the gray blur near this juniper was a vehicle. He transferred the image directly to his goggles, hoping for better resolution. It appeared in holographic form, floating eighteen inches in front of his face.

“Looks like he might have been here still at—” Ozzie called up the date/time stamp, “—1515 hours.” He pushed back his goggles again and checked his sleeve interface for the time of the next photo. Fifteen-thirty. He loaded it, but the gray blur under the juniper was conspicuously absent. “Gone by 1530,” he reported.

He went back to the first picture, but the object was still just a blur to him. A good technician with high resolution equipment might be able to get a car class on the vehicle, though, if not a make and model. He commed his office. “Doris, give this photo I’m sending you to Grayson, see if he can identify the vehicle in it.” Two clicks, and the image was on its way.

When he looked up, he found Ellison grinning at him. “That’s what I like about you Doo-Wer boys,” she said. “You’ve got the greatest toys.”

Ellison herself wore a radio pack on her chest, the same kind the Forest Service had been using twenty-one years ago during the terrorist fires. That concerted attack had bankrupted the Forest Service, and while Congress had passed an emergency appropriation to aid the 150,000 homeowners affected by the disaster, it had balked at covering the tab for fighting the blazes. The Federal agencies involved were expected to cover that out of their existing budgets. National Park Service programs had been compromised for years afterwards by the expense, but the Forest Service had been crippled. Forests throughout the west were closed, their trails and lakes and campgrounds placed off-limits. Three-quarters of the personnel were laid off, with only 25 percent being hired back as contract employees at reduced wages. Forest health and forest rehabilitation went by the wayside; only

programs that generated revenue were staffed: grazing leases, mineral leases, salvage logging. Fire suppression was impossible, and in 2008 another rash of devastating fires—these just the normal run of lightning- and human-caused fires that could not be suppressed—raised an uproar from the general public to do something. Stop the fires. Fix the Forest Service.

So Congress, in its infinite wisdom, had created the Department of Wildland Resources, the DWR, by taking land management agencies away from the Department of Interior, and the Forest Service away from the Department of Agriculture. The new agency was to be both more economical and more streamlined by eliminating duplication of functions and improving communication between units. Ozzie had joined them twelve years ago, coming over from the Fish and Wildlife Service, and so far he hadn't seen much of economy or improved communications. The National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife resented the Forest Service for soaking up dollars that should have been theirs; the Forest Service resented the other agencies for being better staffed and better equipped; and they all resented the Department of Wildland Resources for scraping the cream off the budget dollars and decking out their personnel with the latest electronic gadgets while a Recreation Specialist trying to repair a hiking trail had to get no less than seven approvals to purchase a can of chainsaw lubricant.

And here Ozzie was, leaving a desk loaded with contracts and biodiversity reports to investigate a fire, when the investigator on the scene already had it figured out, and with less sophisticated equipment than Ozzie had. How was that less redundant?

“How long you been fighting fire?” he asked.

“Since oh-three,” she replied with the casual aplomb of a veteran. “What’s that, twenty-four years? Yeah, twenty-four years.”

She had been in the thick of it, then, cutting her teeth on the devastating fires of 2003 and 2004, trying futilely to stem the terrorist fires in 2007, hanging on through the hard times that followed with no budget and no resources. Ozzie had been in elementary school when Carol Ellison first went to work on the firelines. “How many have you investigated?” he wanted to know.

Her answer was a shrug and a hollow-voiced, “Too many, I guess.”

Great. And they sent *him* to check up on *her*.

“What is it about this guy makes you think you’ve seen his work before?” he asked.

Ellison fished something out of her pocket and handed it to him. “This.” It was a candy wrapper. Ozzie smoothed it out enough to see what kind. “Peppermint patty,” she said, though he could read that himself. “This guy likes to enjoy the cool blast of refreshing mint while he watches the hot blast of the inferno he’s created.”

Stopping for lunch, peeling the wrapper off a granola bar, watching the fire on the ridgeline above them. But then suddenly it was behind them, too—oh, God, how had it jumped across the ravine?—and then it was backing down both sides toward them, and tearing up the draw from Kettle Creek, roaring with the voice of hell—

“That’s all you’ve got, a candy wrapper?” he growled.

“Yup.” She took it back from him, folded it neatly and tucked it into her pocket again. “I’ve seen it twice before: he makes himself a little nest, high up on a ridge, settles in with sodas and snacks. First time, we stumbled across it by accident: Coke cans, chip bags—” She patted her pocket. “Candy wrappers. And the gas can he’d used to start the fire—I suppose he didn’t want to pack that out with him. The second time, I followed his tire tracks. He was sitting in his jeep, watching the excitement; I got within twenty yards of him before he waved and took off. I called for a roadblock, but in those days...” She shook her head. “He left a drip torch behind, along with the cans and candy wrappers. Mailed us a letter afterwards, told us which engine company he’d stolen it from.”

Her voice was calm, glazed with irony, but Ozzie’s stomach churned at the thought of a drip torch—a fireman’s tool for starting backfires—being used to set a forest ablaze. The sour taste of smoke in his mouth was suddenly oppressive, and he had to fight the urge to spit. If Ellison was right, if the perp was somewhere close by ... He eyed the western ridge and wet his lips. “You call law enforcement about this?”

She laughed. “Oh, hell, Ozzie, Dispatch isn’t going to call in an LEO on my say-so. That’s for you Doo-Wer boys, not a lowly Fuels Specialist like me.”

He reached for his sleeve interface.

“And the last time I tried to convince my supervisor a candy wrapper meant a serial arsonist,” she continued, “I got posted to the back of nowhere for three years, shuffling papers.”

Ozzie hesitated. A glance at Ellison showed that while her tone might be an easy drawl, her eyes glittered with checked anger. Ozzie knew what it was like to suffer a supervisor’s displeasure. And if she was wrong about this—hell, if she was right but they couldn’t prove it—he would be the one taking the heat, not her. A candy wrapper was awfully thin evidence, especially since he hadn’t seen the records on those previous fires. How did he know she was giving it to him straight? Why hadn’t ICCARUS picked up on the pattern? If he called in law enforcement, adding to the expense of this fire, and it turned out the candy wrapper was a coincidence...

Ellison was staring off at the western ridge. “You got one of those ICCARUS units in your truck, Ozzie?” she asked casually.

“Yeah, I’ve got one,” he admitted.

Her grin was back, but now Ozzie recognized it for what it was: a mask over an old and bitter wound. “Suppose we could call up the action on that ridge over there?” she asked, nodding to the west.

Ozzie tried to imagine what ICCARUS might show him that would be of any use. Satellite photos on file could contribute a photo of the area, but it couldn’t show what was under the trees. The fuel density, fuel types, and fuel moisture levels would all be indicated by colors and patterns, but that wouldn’t help them spot a human being. The infrared ... “Mind telling me what you hope to see?” he asked.

“I hope to get lucky,” she said cheerfully. “I’m hoping Scooter caught him crossing from his car to the rocks up there, or maybe the infrared will pick up residual heat from his flamethrower.”

“Not after eighteen hours!” Ozzie protested.

“Naw, this would be historical footage,” she agreed. “You can call up the historicals, can’t you?”

“Of course.” Ozzie started back toward his truck, and Ellison fell in beside him. It wouldn’t hurt to show her what ICCARUS had generated, but he couldn’t help feeling there was more to her agenda than a wild hope to spot the perpetrator on snapshots taken at fifteen-minute intervals. After the first hour, the interval would have increased to six hours, just sufficient to monitor fire spread.

“Don’t suppose you could request a current satellite photo of that area,” she said.

Now she was pushing it. “If I feel it’s warranted,” he hedged. The Forest Service might think the DWR was made of money, but Ozzie’s supervisor didn’t share the opinion. Why spend money on a satellite photo when a lead plane could fly over the area and get the information they needed? Of course, to get that, they would have to convince the Incident Commander on this fire it was necessary. Ozzie knew the IC; it was going to take more than a candy wrapper.

When they reached the truck, Ozzie lifted out the ICCARUS unit and set it up on the hood where they could both see it. The first thing that came up was the overview of the Matchless Fire; the image updated in real time, as new data was added, and Ozzie winced to see how close the fire was getting to the campground. The facilities there had been rebuilt only four years ago, having been destroyed in the terrorist fires of 2007. He touched the menu button, selected “status,” then touched the screen at the point of the campground. A blowup of the area appeared, along with figures summarizing fire activity, weather conditions, fuel conditions, the number and kinds of crews and equipment deployed in the area, and the objectives of the command team for that location.

Ellison gave a low whistle. “You know, when I started with the Outfit,” she drawled, using an insider’s term for the Forest Service, “infrared was a Type 1 resource. Now look.”

The naked envy in her voice made Ozzie self-conscious. “Now you’re walking around with infrared on your head,” he observed, tapping the screen to bring back the overview.

She put a hand to her goggles. “What, these? Had to buy these myself.”

That explained it. It also said something about Ellison, that she was willing to shell out her own money to have better tools. Seasonal firefighters had to purchase their own gear, of course, from fire-resistant clothing to fire shelters, and Agency firefighters had to take theirs out of their uniform allowance; but multi-function goggles were a tool, like a shovel or a pulaski, and no one was expected to buy his or her own. They were also expensive; it wasn’t like buying one of the newer, better fire shelters...

“Deploy!” someone shouted as they raced up the ravine, losing ground to the flames. He could see the newbie in front of him groping for the plastic case at the small of her back, stopping to rip it open and snatch out the aluminum and fiberglass shelter that was supposed to protect her from the radiant heat, supposed to trap breathable air inside with her. It was one of the new shelters, but Ozzie’s was old, it hadn’t been out of its case in the fifteen years he’d owned it. He reached for it, but was afraid to stop running; there was no cleared area, the ravine was full of fuels, and if he deployed here, there would be dry grass under him. It would bring the fire to his shelter, let it inside. So he kept running—

“Ozzie? You okay?”

He came back with a start. “Yeah, fine,” he lied. He tapped the ICCARUS screen where the image of the western ridge appeared; but before the enlarged picture resolved, it occurred to him that he had never introduced himself to Carol Ellison, and yet she had called him by name just now. She knew who he was. That meant she knew what had happened to him. The gaze he turned on her was cold. “I don’t remember telling you my name.”

“Didn’t have to.” She grinned, a smug grin this time. “I asked for you.”

“By name?” Why would she do that?

Her eyes measured him a moment before she answered, “I figured you know more about fire than most.”

Most DWR agents, she meant. The DWR had a reputation for being administrative in nature, for shunning field work. So she had asked for the one guy she knew had worked the firelines. After the Drover Fire, it was a name every firefighter in the area knew.

“You know, that chip on your shoulder doesn’t interest me in the least, so you might as well stick it in your pocket,” she advised him. “That’s where I keep mine. Carol Ellison,” she introduced, pulling off a glove and offering her hand. “Call me Ellie.”

The sight of that hand jarred Ozzie, even as her nickname rang a bell. Her palm and fingers were gnarled by old, white scar tissue—burn scars, scars incurred before medical technology could grow replacement skin from a person’s own cells, when grafts had to be taken from other parts of her body—Of course: the Flintlock Fire, in 2010. The crew that got burned over on Kingfisher Ridge. The only survivor.

The man in front of Ozzie was deploying his shelter; feet and hands in the corner straps, he stretched it like a sail in the howling wind, then fell to the ground, pulling the flaps in under him. Ozzie detoured around him, but he knew it was now or never. He had to deploy. There were still patches of grass here, but not as much. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad. Maybe he wouldn’t take any fire in his shelter—

Ozzie withdrew his own glove and clasped Ellie’s hand firmly, but gently. The scar tissue was an odd texture, lumpy but almost slick, and it made his stomach churn. “Oswaldo Mendoza,” he said, refusing to shy away from the sensation. “But I guess you knew that.” There was suddenly a kinship between them that could not be denied. Sole survivors. Was that why she had asked for him, by name?

When he drew his hand back, Ellie Ellison lifted hers and regarded the deep scars as though they were a soot smudge or a berry stain she had just noticed. “I was cold trailing,” she said absently, referring to the mop-up technique of running a bare hand through the ashes of a fire to make sure there were no hotspots. “Had my right glove off. Then I looked up at the sky, and something wet hit my cheek. I was afraid a bird got me, so I pulled off my left glove, too, and wiped at my face with my clean hand.” She pulled off her left glove now, to display the same kind of scars. “It was rain,” she said simply. “That’s when I knew.”

What Ellie had known was that the smoke plume from the fire was about to collapse. It had risen thousands of feet into the atmosphere until it ran into a cold layer of air that caused the moisture in it to condense and fall back to earth as scattered raindrops. Only a few made it through the superheated air over the fire to fall on the hands and faces of firefighters, but Ellie had recognized them as harbingers of disaster.

She had shouted to her crew boss, who radioed Dispatch, then told his crew to pull back to their van, just in case. He didn’t think there was any rush. They were climbing an unburned hillside, a shortcut back to the van, when they saw the fire coming. Pushed by the microburst winds of the collapsing plume, it jumped from treetop to treetop through a canopy left untouched by the earlier surface fire. Some tried to outrun it; others opened their tent-like shelters and fell to the ground where they were on the slope. Ellie, who had been more alarmed than her crew boss and

had trotted ahead of the others, made it over the crest of the hill before she deployed hers. When flames invaded her sanctuary, she had beaten them out with her ungloved hands. There on the lee side of the hill, where the convective heat of the fire's leading edge had rolled over her and toxic gases had not forced their way into her shelter, she had survived.

Now she pulled her gloves back on over the grisly reminders of her ordeal. "Stupid," she said with a trace of smile that belied the pain in her eyes. "To this day I can't remember what I did with those gloves. Must have dropped them. So, can we see historicals of that ridge now?"

Unnerved, Ozzie turned back to ICCARUS and tapped the screen several times to bring up the latest satellite view of the western ridge, as opposed to the composite now showing. The ridge was thick with trees on the east, but only sparsely vegetated on the west with a two-track road leading up toward the crest from that direction. At the top, a rock outcrop protruded, angled toward the east and broken by numerous fissures that could easily conceal a human being. The resolution was better on ICCARUS than on his sleeve interface, but it was still grainy. Even with maximum magnification, Ozzie couldn't see anything noteworthy.

Patiently, he began to go back through the historicals. They were sketchy; there had been no reason to photograph this ridge, so there was only what was incidental to capturing the fire. But just before sundown last night, the lead plane doing size-up had snapped one photo, and there was a dot on the two-track road.

Ozzie put full magnification on the dot; it was still just a dot. Someone or something had been on that road at 1823 last night, but it was impossible to say if it was a man or a bear, a vehicle or an elk. He looked at Ellie.

Her face was blank, devoid of even her masking smile. What was she thinking? What was she feeling?

"Want to take a drive?" she asked.

A candy wrapper, and a dot on an aerial photo. He could get law enforcement out here on his authority, but how long would it take? And if he was wrong ... "Is it always the same kind of candy wrapper?" he asked.

"Yeah. Always the same." She waited patiently as he deliberated.

"And it was just two other fires?"

"That I know of. One other I strongly suspect. But you can bet he's set others; just somebody else did the investigation and missed the clues." She shifted her weight, and Ozzie sensed the tension she worked so carefully to conceal. "We can take my green rig," she offered, indicating the Forest Service pickup.

She wanted this guy. He had taunted her, cost her three years on someone's shit list, and it was personal. She wanted him to be on that ridge now. But was he?

“Wouldn’t hurt to get up a little closer,” Ozzie admitted. He closed up ICCARUS and tucked it under his arm.

As they left the point of origin, the smell of smoke faded but did not vanish. It was on his clothes now, in his hair, and like a ghost it continued to haunt his senses.

“You still have nightmares?” Ellie asked as they bounced over the forest road to the western side of the ridge.

“Yeah. You?”

“Not in a couple years. Doesn’t mean I won’t have one tonight.”

They started up the zigzag track toward the crest of the ridge. Ozzie tried to phrase his question. “Do you—Do you ever—feel like *yourself* again?”

“It’s a new you.” She took the truck expertly around a four-foot pine sapling growing up in the middle of the track. “The first time you were born of water, the second time of fire. You start right there, start over.”

Learning to walk again, learning to control newly-grown muscles commanded by newly-grown nerves—

“There.”

They were about a hundred yards from the crest of the ridge; Ellie brought the truck to a stop and pointed off through the trees to the left. “There it is.”

On the far side of a thick-trunked juniper, with its nose pointed downhill, was a late-model off-road vehicle, black and coated with dust. Ozzie’s stomach did a quick pirouette. “That was a hell of a lucky guess,” he breathed.

“Now, don’t you make light of my detective work,” Ellie chided as she deftly maneuvered her pickup to sit sideways across the dirt track, blocking the road. “I told you, I know how this guy thinks. So, shall we go have a look in that ORV?” Without waiting for an answer, she opened her door and climbed out.

Ozzie hesitated. They didn’t have a search warrant, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t peer inside the vehicle. If they saw anything suspicious, he could request law enforcement and a tele-warrant. He really didn’t have the authority for this kind of action, and neither did Ellie. Unlike park rangers, who were all law enforcement officers, Forest Service employees had no powers of arrest and were forbidden to carry fire-arms.

But Ellie was hiking determinedly toward the ORV, and Ozzie figured he’d better go with her.

The trees were thin here, but the grass was thick, nurtured by spring rains and dried by summer’s heat to the finest tinder Mother Nature could provide. *He could feel the bunch grass through the floor of his fire shelter, knew he was lying on dry*

fuels, with more dry fuels around him. The tiny tent of aluminum and fiberglass construction would deflect 95 percent of radiant heat, but it would burn if exposed to direct flame. Still, it was the only hope Ozzie had, for the temperature outside would be well over a thousand degrees; a single breath could kill him—

Ozzie labored to catch up with Ellie, his knees and ankles working stiffly, the new skin and muscle around them still not as flexible as he wished. “What do you expect to find?” he asked, only a little winded.

She laughed, scarcely seeming to breathe hard. “A flamethrower!”

“You think he’s that stupid, to leave a flamethrower out where we can see it?”

“No, I think he’s that brazen.” She stopped to face Ozzie, and her mask slipped, exposing the naked anger beneath. “He’s taunting us, Ozzie. He’s daring us to catch him. He’s been making fools of us for seventeen years, and he gets bolder with every fire. I got within yards of him last time: he laughed at me. He thinks this is funny.”

Seventeen years ... A chill ran through Ozzie as he made the connection. “He set the Flintlock Fire?” The one Ellie had survived—

“I can’t prove it,” she admitted. “But I saw the evidence bag, stuff they picked up at the point of origin. A box of matches. A half-burned newspaper.” She drew a measured breath. “A mint patty wrapper.”

Now she started toward the ORV again, and Ozzie fell into step beside her. “I remembered that wrapper eight years later,” she told him, “when I was investigating the Ponchito Fire. When I saw the same kind of wrapper at the point of origin, and in the trash from his nest. I tried to point out a connection and got my butt busted for it, reassigned to a desk up at Happy Jack. Some big-shot Dee-Dub wanted to write it up as a terror attack, hoping to get more money for his zone. That’s why I got so close to this guy the second time. If I caught him, there wouldn’t be any question.”

They had reached the vehicle, but Ozzie caught her arm. “We’re not going to catch this guy,” he said bluntly. “If we see anything suspicious, we’re calling for law enforcement.”

Ellie grinned disarmingly. “Sure. That’s why I brought you along, so you could request law enforcement. They’ll listen to you.”

Something about that didn’t ring right, but Ozzie couldn’t tell what. He let go of her. “All right, let’s have a look.”

The first thing he checked was the tires on the ORV; they were Michelin QXs, no surprise, with fairly new tread. The side and rear windows of the vehicle were lightly tinted, a token shield against the Arizona sun. Ozzie looked in through the tailgate. A gasoline can was clearly visible.

But it wasn't illegal to carry a gas can. If you traveled long distances in the back country, or if you pulled a boat with your rig—

“Over here,” Ellie called.

A flamethrower lay on the ground by the front wheel.

“Looks like he was planning to leave it behind,” she said, her nonchalant drawl back in place. “Kind of hard to get past the roadblocks with it, I suppose.”

Ozzie's mind rebelled. It was too convenient, too pat. Criminals didn't leave huge clues like this. Or did they? What Ozzie knew of criminals was more from movies and television than from personal experience. Maybe they *were* just that stupid. Or maybe, as Ellie suggested, this guy was thumbing his nose at them.

Here near the top of the ridge, treetops rustled in the gentle southwesterly breeze. *Wind in the trees, and the roar of the fire on the ridge*— “I'll run the license plate,” Ozzie said, reaching to activate his sleeve interface.

But Ellie caught his wrist with her gloved hand. “Before you do that,” she said quietly.

His nerves quaking, he looked into her pale blue eyes; they were so clear and level and cold they transfixed him.

“You know what'll happen,” she said. “By the time they get out here, he'll have spotted us. He may be watching us right now.” She nodded toward the crest of the ridge above them, where the rock outcropping kept the trees at bay. “He'll high-tail it down the other side of this ridge, or maybe run past us right here. Which of us is going to catch him? You?”

Ozzie knew he would be doing well to manage a painful trot. He looked toward the rocky crest. “You think he's up there?”

“I know he is.”

“Know?” His eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You *know*?” Then it dawned on him. The goggles. “You saw him up here, didn't you? Before I even arrived.”

One corner of her mouth twitched upward. “He stood up to take a leak.” Her hand touched the goggles, resting now above the rim of her helmet. “I had full magnification on, hoping to spot him.”

“Why didn't you call for law enforcement?” Ozzie demanded, knowing he had been set up, not knowing why. “What did you expect *me* to do?”

“I can't let him get away,” Ellie said evenly. “I can't risk it. I needed the roadblocks: that meant I had to have a Doo-Wer. So I wanted one who knew what it was like.”

“What *what* was like?”

“What it’s like to burn!” she snarled, her composure gone, ripped away like a fire shelter caught in tornado-force winds. “What it’s like to feel your lungs sear, to know death is reaching for you!”

Holding the acrid air in his lungs, knowing it held no oxygen, knowing the next breath would be worse, knowing he was going to die—

“To feel your flesh burning, to know the pain, and know there’s not a damned thing you can do but take it!”

Beating at the flames inside the shelter with his gloved hands—but he couldn’t reach the fire at his feet, couldn’t do anything about it. Nowhere to go, and nothing to do but scream, burn and scream, and scream, and scream—

Her voice dropped. “I’ve got a drip torch in my toolkit,” she said, nodding back toward the pickup. “We could start over there, to the north, and lay a line of fire to the road here, just like a backfire. Cut him off. The incline will carry the fire up to him.”

“Are you nuts?” Ozzie blurted, horrified.

“It’ll die out on the other side,” she went on. “It’s all rock over there, too steep for much to grow—too steep for him to climb down.”

He stared at her, hoping she was joking, but she wasn’t. “You *are* nuts!”

“Did you see the others?” Her voice was hollow, the voice of someone else. “When you came out of your shelter, did you see the rest of your crew?”

Little blankets of blackened aluminum peeled back, and here and there the glimpse of a hunched up figure—

“No,” he lied. “I was in bad shape. They put me on morphine right away, carried me out on a litter.”

“I saw every one of them,” she breathed, her voice barely audible over the rustle of tree limbs, the whine of the wind. “Before the rescue team got there. I shouted at them first, begging one, just one of them, to be alive. I tore away the shelters with my burned hands. I found the ones who tried to run.”

Screams piercing the din, desperate voices shrieking for God’s attention, and then the roar of the fire blotting it all out—

“Let him know how it feels,” she hissed. “He likes fire so much, let him know how it feels to be trapped. To see the fire coming for you, and not be able to do anything about it.”

Cut off from their safety zone by fire that shouldn’t have been there. Racing

the dragon, knowing they must lose, knowing it was all going to end here—

“No,” Ozzie croaked harshly. “I won’t do that to anybody. Not even him.”

For a moment her face twisted in anguish; then she leaned in close to him, as though to keep her words from the trees that rattled their branches overhead. “Do you know who started your fire?”

Ozzie’s heart contracted in his chest. No. No, that was too much. They’d kept him in a drug-induced coma for months while his body tried to heal, while it fought infection, while they grew new skin and stimulated new muscle cells. But when he came out of it, when he came back to a world hazy from pain and medication, they had told him the Drover Fire was caused by a campfire that got out of control. A campfire—not a maniac with a drip torch.

“You’re sick,” he grated. “I’m calling for law enforcement.” Turning away from her, he tapped his sleeve interface to life with a shaking hand. “Doris, get law enforcement to this lat-long.” The chip in his sleeve would supply the latitude and longitude; Ozzie doubted he could read it from a map just now. “We may have the perp up on this ridge. I need you to run a license plate, too; we found a vehicle up here, and a flamethrower—”

The slam of the pickup’s tailgate jerked him around, and he saw Ellie striding toward the ridge with a rifle in one hand. “Hey!” he shouted, ambling painfully back toward the green rig. “Ellie!”

“Stay out of my way, Dee-Dub!” she shouted back.

“Are you crazy?” Ozzie forced his reluctant limbs to work harder, faster. “Come back here!”

“I’m tired of him being at the point of origin. I’m going to make this his point of termination.”

Ozzie nearly tripped over a tree root, but caught himself and kept going. “Is that worth throwing your life away?” he demanded. “They’ll send you up for murder.”

“I’ll plead insanity.”

“And spend the rest of your days in a mental institution?” His calves were shrieking, they felt like they were burning all over again.

“Why should you care?” Ellie picked up her pace as he drew near.

“Why should I care?” Ozzie didn’t know. She was crazy, certifiable, and maybe she ought to be locked up; but she’d already done time in an eighty-six-inch by thirty-one-inch by fifteen-and-a-half-inch fire shelter. He felt drained, dizzy; but with one last burst of effort, he launched himself at her knees in a classic football

tackle.

Ellie went down with a cry of surprise. Then she began to struggle, but Ozzie kept his grasp on her legs until he could catch one flailing arm and wrench it around behind her. She was strong, but she was no match for him; the muscles in his arms and chest were well-seasoned, and he kept her pinned. Finally she surrendered and lay panting on the dirt. In the stillness of the forest's murmuring, he heard her begin to sob.

* * * *

Two sheriff's deputies arrived about forty minutes later. Ellie was calm and coherent by that time, and her unsanctioned rifle had disappeared back into the long toolbox in the bed of the green rig. The deputies inspected the ORV, which had been reported stolen in Pinetop three days earlier; they photographed the flamethrower, conferred with Ozzie, and then fanned out to approach the rock outcrop at the crest of the ridge.

"He'll be gone," Ellie said glumly, crouched in the shade of an Apache pine.

"Yeah, I know." Ozzie had ICCARUS set up on the hood of the pickup and was watching the fire's progress. He had been watching it off and on for the last thirty minutes. It was mesmerizing.

"All they'll find is his nest: soda cans, chip bags, candy wrappers."

"Yup." The wind had pushed flames into the campground; as the screen refreshed, he watched the portable outhouses buckle and melt, watched the fee station blaze up.

"And in a couple years, he'll be back to start another one."

The screen refreshed again, and the fire had jumped to a cluster of picnic tables. "Not this time," Ozzie said.

Ellie lifted her drooping head to turn suspicious eyes on him.

"I got him on the bird," Ozzie told her. "Filed the request almost as soon as you stopped kicking. Scooter's been taking pictures of this ridge and the surrounding area once every two minutes for the past half hour. The perp took off when he saw the first sheriff's unit turn onto the control road, about twenty minutes ago. He's headed north—looks like there's a hiking trail up there that leads back down to FR 66. A Forest LEO and a half dozen deputies are closing in on it now. Here, you want to see?" He brought ICCARUS over to where she sat and eased himself onto the ground beside her, ignoring the protest from his rebuilt calves.

Ellie stared at the screen as he toggled from the fire to the satellite photos showing the perp's ragged trek off the ridge. Finally she smiled. It was a wan and weary smile, a mere shadow of her former grin, but it warmed Ozzie's heart. "That's what I like about you Doo-Wer boys," she said, watching the law enforcement

officers move into place near the trail's end. "You've got the greatest toys."

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