



Imagine That

by Katef

Part 1. An Unconventional Pair

“Awwww, Jim! Don’t be like that! Please man! Jeez, I’d never’ve told you if I thought you’d go off like this....!”

As Detective Jim Ellison slammed into the Major Crimes bullpen, the plaintive words followed him as his young partner and Guide trailed after him, his shorter stride making him have to almost jog to catch up. At the interruption, several heads turned their way, some genuinely interested, some not, and some – covertly – outright contemptuous as the smaller man trotted over to join his buff companion at Jim’s desk.

Still scowling, Jim glared down at his Guide’s upturned face, momentarily ignoring the pleading expression as he hissed, “Not now, Sandburg! We’ve got work to do. We’ll talk later.”

“But Jim” the younger man responded, automatically lowering his voice also. “There’s nothing to talk about, man! I just wanted to tell you about Eli’s offer because I was so jazzed that he would even suggest it! You know I’d never leave you to go off to Borneo for a year or more, man. I don’t think either of us could cope--”

Face softening noticeably, Jim interrupted. “OK, Chief, enough already. I’m sorry, Blair. Guess I overreacted there for a minute, huh?”

His own expression lightening in relief, Blair grinned back up at him, his response teasing and happy now. "You don't say, Jim! Not like you at all, huh?" and he ducked automatically to avoid the soft whap aimed at the back of his curly head as the tension between them eased again.

Rapport re-established, Jim sat down at his desk while Blair plopped down on the spare chair he had acquired courtesy of Rhonda, Captain Banks' cool, blonde and very efficient secretary. Smile widening, he pulled the nearest stack of reports towards him, knowing that a few hours' typing loomed before him, and not in the least concerned about it. This was because he also knew that Jim was always grateful to be spared the chore, and would undoubtedly make it up to him later....

From inside his office, Captain Simon Banks watched the interaction, a frown of irritation on his dark-skinned face as he once again considered the odd pairing, wondering not for the first time if he had made the right decision in offering Ellison a position in his unit.

Just over a year ago, Simon had taken over as Captain of Major Crimes, having successfully fought against, and defeated, significant opposition in the guise of barely-concealed bigotry that still existed within the ranks of the PD despite declarations to the contrary. He was deservedly proud of his achievement, and was determined to shake up the department, fully intending that under his leadership it would reach the top of the arrest and conviction rate rankings in double-quick time. With that objective in mind, he had been glad to grant Detective Jim Ellison an interview, knowing that the man already had an impressive reputation for solid policework and in fact came highly recommended by his ex-Captain, Mike Sullivan of the Vice unit.

Unfortunately for Simon, he now suspected that both the application and recommendation appeared to have had an ulterior motive, which soon came to light once Ellison had joined his team. Banks was a proud man who didn't take kindly to being duped, if that was really the case, but he still couldn't deny that Ellison's record of achievement had impressed him, even after mere weeks in his unit.

And although he hated to admit it, a lot of that success seemed to be down to Ellison's partnership with the hyperactive and aggravating grad student, Blair Sandburg, who followed him around like a friendly, boisterous puppy.

Rubbing his face with a large hand, Banks recalled the conversation with Mike Sullivan when he had met with the guy to discuss Ellison's application, curious to know as to why the detective wanted to work in his department when he was so obviously successful in Vice. And in retrospect, he was well aware that although Sullivan had been up front and honest to a degree, he had still managed to be somewhat selective in the information he offered.

Previous year, Simon Banks' office

"Hey, Mike. Good to see you. Take a seat!" Major Crime's new boss stood up from where he was seated behind his desk and held out his hand to his visitor.

Shaking the offered appendage, Captain Mike Sullivan grinned affably and settled himself in a comfortable chair opposite Banks, his demeanour relaxed and open.

"So, Simon, how're things going so far? I understand you've have quite a shake-up in here. Starting afresh as you mean to go on, huh?"

"Yep, have to say it's been quite therapeutic in a way, although I guess some of my ex-people won't see it that way," came the sardonic reply as Simon's smile became a wry grimace.

"But I'm sure you want to get down to business, Mike. What can you tell me about Detective Ellison? On the surface, he looks good for MCU's new team, but I'd like to find out more about him. I mean, why would he want to leave your department when he's already proven to be so successful?"

Sitting back and clasping his hands on his lap, Sullivan gazed frankly at the other man before answering.

"Well, that's a fair question, Simon, and one I'm happy to answer. Yes, I'll be sorry to see Jim go, because you're right. He's been a credit to Vice, and has a more than acceptable arrest and conviction rate under his belt.

"On the other hand, you can probably guess how wearing the type of cases my unit gets involved with can be on my team members, especially during undercover work. If they're any good, that is. Rubbing shoulders constantly with the sort of sickos and sleazebags we have to deal with can make the most dedicated officers cynical and hard, if not downright depressed, unless they're totally insensitive anyway. And if that were the case I wouldn't want them under my command.

"And between you and me, Ellison's had enough. Sure, you'll find he's a prickly customer at the best of times – and at the worst he's got a real attitude – but you couldn't want a more capable and focussed man, I assure you. He just wants the chance to work in different circumstances, and I can't blame him for that."

Resting his chin on his steepled fingers, Simon regarded his visitor carefully as he absorbed the information offered. After a few moments, his face broke into a satisfied grin as he replied.

"Thanks Mike. I think that's all I need to know for now. I'll be interviewing Ellison this afternoon, so I'll let you know as soon as I make my decision," and he rose to show Sullivan out of the office.

Present

Thoughts returning to the present, Simon continued to study the pair for a few moments, particularly Sandburg. He was undeniably beautiful in a completely masculine way, with long curly hair, which today he had tied back in a neat ponytail at his nape. Without the distraction of the shining, silky locks which frequently framed his face, the eyes were immediately drawn to his stunning bone structure. Blair had a broad brow, high cheekbones and a firm chin. His nose was neat, blue eyes huge and expressive complemented by a lush-lipped mouth. All in all, he was a delight to behold, although he seemed to have absolutely no concept of his effect on others. Certainly he was on the small side, being several inches shorter than Ellison, and considerably shorter than Simon's own brawny 6'4" frame, but he was perfectly proportioned for all that. He was also irrepressibly exuberant, big-hearted and highly intelligent – he already had his Master's degree at barely 22 years of age and was well into his doctoral programme – and he irritated the hell out of Simon.

He was a complete contrast to his partner, Jim Ellison, who, at about ten years Sandburg's senior, was a man Simon would have liked to get to know better without the annoying shadow. Ellison was ex-army, buff and handsome in a clean-cut, patrician way, with slightly receding short brown hair and a ramrod-straight bearing. Certainly, when he had first arrived in the MCU bullpen he looked every inch the Vice cop, but he had quickly adjusted both attire and demeanour to fit in with his new position.

On the other hand, he barely seemed to have warmed the seat at his new desk before springing his mind-boggling surprise on Banks, in the form of young Blair Sandburg, Jim's Guide and wannabe Observer, and Simon was still aggrieved by the manner and consequences of the revelation. A heads-up from Mike Sullivan would have been much appreciated, but after hearing all about the Sentinel voodoo shit, Simon understood why Mike might want it out of his unit. Hell, if it wasn't for the fact that the partnership was so immediately effective, Simon would have kicked Ellison and his 'Guide' out on their respective butts. And he still wasn't convinced that that wasn't an option, depending on how they tackled the next case he had in mind for them.

However, despite his personal reservations, Simon grudgingly admitted that Ellison and Sandburg deserved to be judged on their success rates rather than his somewhat biased opinion, so he gave himself an admonishing shake, and opened his office door.

“Ellison, Sandburg! My office! Now!”

Jim and Blair entered the office with Blair slightly in front, Jim's hand in its customary proprietary place in the small of the younger man's back. Both looked expectant, with Sandburg offering a rather nervous smile of greeting. When Simon indicated that they sit, they automatically positioned themselves right next to each other, with Blair's hand resting on Jim's knee. Suppressing a sigh and the urge to snap at the annoying action, Simon restrained himself from commenting as he knew he would only be letting himself in for another mini-lecture on the necessity of the Guide's touch to ground the Sentinel whether or not the circumstances seemed to warrant it. Didn't mean that he had to approve, however, and the constant touching certainly made him uncomfortable at times, as he was sure it did for others in the department. Having said that, those who knew and liked the pair simply accepted their behaviour for what it was. Blair had, after all, managed to charm many otherwise hard-nosed cops in a remarkably short time, and he had the administration staff – even Simon's own secretary Rhonda – positively eating out of his hand.

On the other hand, since they had decided to keep the whole 'Sentinel / Guide' dynamic on a need-to-know basis only for the time being for the sake of Jim's privacy and safety, it was hardly surprising that the less sympathetic and unenlightened members of the department saw the pair in a distinctly less charitable light. Simon was aware that there were plenty of derogatory comments made, particularly about Blair. Despite the considerable contribution Jim's Guide made to the work of the department as a whole, there were those who saw his appointment as an official observer as complete anathema, especially in view of his smart mouth, laid-back and tolerant hippy attitude and general 'pretty boy' attractiveness. And the fact that he seemed to have a good cop wrapped around his little finger....

Fixing the pair with his usual frowning scrutiny, Simon kept them hanging a few moments longer – just because he could – then he began.

“So, Jim. Everything OK on the senses front? I couldn't help but note your little altercation when you arrived--”

“Oh, no, Si...er...Captain! That was my fault...,” Blair broke in, as usual trying to deflect unwanted attention away from Jim onto himself.

“When I want your input, Sandburg, I'll ask for it!” Simon snarled back, angry at being interrupted yet again by the impetuous young man.

Blair's face fell, and he shrank into himself, cheeks pinking in embarrassment as Jim noted his unique scent becoming tainted with distress. Glancing worriedly at his Guide, Jim responded in his turn, tone quiet but forceful. Squeezing Blair's shoulder comfortingly, he glared at his Captain as he said, “There was no need for that, sir! I know you're not particularly happy with the nature of our partnership, but you should know by now that Blair only ever has my welfare at heart, and I'd be obliged if you'd at least try to give him credit for that.

“Now, as to your question, yes, my senses are just fine, thank you. And thanks to Blair” – this said with a fond grin directed at the man in question. “So, what is it you want to run by us, sir?” he asked, and sat back, eyebrow raised inquisitively as Simon harrumphed in discomfiture.

“OK, point taken Ellison,” he growled. “Sorry, Sandburg. That was uncalled-for.” And he was immediately granted a happy smile from the easy-going student, even though he was uncomfortably aware that he didn't deserve such instant forgiveness.

"Anyhow, there're a couple of things I want to bring you up to speed on," and he fell back on the neutral territory of department business to defuse any remaining tension in the room.

"First, I wanted to congratulate you both on the closing of the Manson case. I understand that it was Sandburg's research – and intuition – that led to the identification of Manson's MO, and your senses that literally sniffed out the 'trophies' the sick bastard had taken from his victims. With luck he'll be going away for a long time, if he ever sees the light of day outside of a prison block again.

"Secondly, we have a new detective starting in Major Crimes tomorrow. I think you both know him. His name's Emanuel Ignacio, fresh from passing his detective's exams. With credit, I might add."

"Oh, sure, we know Manny," replied Jim cheerfully, while Blair bounced slightly in his seat, nodding happily. "We've come across him a few times while he was in uniform. Seems like a bright enough kid. Who's he going to be partnered with?"

"Well, once Marvin Anderson's back off sick leave, I'll be putting them together. Anderson's an old hand at breaking in rookies, and I think Ignacio'll learn a lot from him. But in the meantime, I'd like him to accompany you. Now, I don't expect you to do your 'Sentinel' stuff while he's with you," Simon added quickly, cutting off Jim's automatic refusal before he could utter it. "Just show him the ropes on a few routine follow-ups for a couple of days, OK?"

Knowing he didn't really have grounds for arguing, Jim nodded reluctantly. "OK, sir. I guess it won't hurt. He could come with me when Blair's busy at Rainier, because I'd never attempt to use the senses anyway without him at my side. And we're getting much better at being able to function apart for longer periods before we need to link again."

"TMI, Jim, TMI!" Banks responded with a pained chuckle. "That bonding stuff is definitely something I don't want to know about, guys! Anyhow, if that's settled, there's a third issue which involves a new case. Something I think you two'll be perfect to take on."

As Jim and Blair sat back to listen, turning their full attention onto their boss, Simon began.

Part 2: New case, old fears

A short while later, Blair was barely holding it together, Jim was in full Blessed Protector mode, and Simon was confused and frustrated.

Both apprehensive because of Jim's growling antipathy and genuinely surprised by the extreme reactions his words had provoked, Simon sat back and stared at his men in consternation.

The reason behind Blair's distress lay in the nature of the case Simon had just outlined for the pair, although he had no way of knowing that without being brought up to speed. He had simply explained how he proposed to tackle the investigation, and expected his best team to comply with his wishes.

Opening the file on his desk, he had begun by pushing a glossy flyer over for them to look at.

"This is part of the advertising campaign announcing the opening of Cascade's latest art gallery. It actually opened officially last week, and apparently the local cognoscenti – or wannabe art critics – are falling over themselves to lavish praise on the whole enterprise, particularly the exhibit provided by the actual proprietor, Rory O'Brien."

"I've heard of him," Blair murmured, brow creased in thought as he studied the superciliously smiling image of the man in question.

"His work was highly acclaimed in New York and Washington. I believe he had several major exhibits there, and won a couple of awards. When I was over at Rainier's Art department last year, several of the students were talking about organising a trip to visit one of his exhibitions..."

"Might have guessed you'd know something about him, Chief," Jim replied, not without pride in his Guide's vast and eclectic knowledge base.

"So, why is he of interest to us, Captain? Or has he been robbed or something?"

With an impatient snort, Simon snapped, "Well, if you'll allow me to continue, I'll explain!

"On the surface, O'Brien is just as he appears. A successful artist, beloved of the critics, and making serious bucks from the sales of his canvases. He also obviously has the business acumen to open and run a gallery that has all the hallmarks of becoming the place to be seen by Cascade's rich and famous and 'beautiful people'," he added, sarcasm colouring his tone.

"But here the picture gets darker. Word is that Mr O'Brien doesn't just create pictures and deal with fellow artists' work, but he is also suspected of being either behind, or part of, a group of international art thieves. He's certainly widely travelled, and according to the police in more than a few countries, he appears to turn up in various cities around about the time that works of art and valuable artefacts go missing. So far there's been absolutely nothing concrete to link him to the thefts, but it's pretty obvious that his presence is more than coincidental--" and he frowned again as Blair broke in once more.

"Oh, man! Do you think he could have had something to do with the theft of those rare Etruscan artefacts from that gallery in Rome a couple of years ago? They were never traced, and there was almost an international incident when the Italian government blamed some French Minister--"

"When I can get a word in, Sandburg!" Simon snarked, gratified when Blair blushed and shut down, but earning himself an angry glare from Ellison.

"As I was saying. Yes, it might well have been O'Brien and his cronies, but as always, no hard evidence has come to light.

"So, gentlemen, seeing as the man has done us the honour of setting up his latest enterprise in Cascade, we have been given the opportunity to do what foreign police forces have failed to do so far. Get proof of his criminal activities, - or not, as the case may be." He sat back, grinning smugly at his audience.

"Sounds fair enough, Captain, but how do you intend to proceed? It's obvious you have a plan in mind." Jim gazed inquisitively at his boss while Blair looked on, curiosity written all over his expressive face.

"That I have, Jim, and I think it's right up your street. Well, both your streets, actually," and he smirked at his own humour. "It's something you've both done before, and entails Blair going undercover as an artist's model..."

Caught up in his own enthusiasm, he failed to notice the instant wariness that affected both Jim and Blair, or how Blair's features were suddenly drained of all colour.

"I understand that Blair did something similar last year – the Bartlett case wasn't it?" and that was as far as he got before Jim erupted.

"NO! No WAY, Captain! Do you have any idea what he went through? Any idea what the fall-out entailed? If you did, sir, then you'd know that it's impossible. I won't allow it!"

"What the hell do you mean, 'you won't allow it' Detective?" Banks responded angrily, enraged at his subordinate's attitude. "Just who do you think you're talking to, Ellison?" However, before he

could continue his rant, he suddenly really looked at Sandburg, and frowned at what he saw. Moderating his tone, his expression now one of perplexity, he appealed to the still fuming Sentinel.

"Look, Jim, calm down, OK? Just tell me what's wrong with him. Why does he look as if he's going to have a full-scale panic attack before my very eyes, huh? All this because of a new case? There has to be more to it..."

With a huge effort, Blair pulled himself together, knowing that he had to calm down for Jim's sake before the detective said or did something that could have dire consequences later on. Embarrassed by his melt-down in front of Simon, he took several deep, cleansing breaths.

"S'OK, man, I'm...I'll be alright in a minute, Big Guy," he whispered in a rather quavery tone. Reaching out to pat Jim's clenched fist with a shaky hand, he did his best to send calming thoughts through their empathic link, trying hard to convince his lover that he was over his dramatic reaction, and that the Sentinel could stand down.

"I...I think we should bring the Captain up to speed with the B-B-Bartlett case, man. He deserves to know what I did. Exactly what I did..." and he ducked his head again in shame, the after-effects of his first involvement with the PD still having the power to upset and undermine his limited self-confidence.

When a large, warm palm cupped his cheek, he looked up again to meet Jim's concerned gaze, relieved to see that the light of battle had faded to be replaced by affection.

"If you're sure you're OK with that, Chief. I think once he knows what you went through, he won't hold it against you if you don't want to get involved this time," and he brushed his thumb gently over Blair's lower lip before turning back to face his Captain who was watching the interchange with curiosity and no little impatience.

Holding the older man's gaze with a determined and unequivocal one of his own, Jim began to speak, all the while holding Blair's hand firmly in his warm grasp and knowing through their link that Blair was happy for him to speak for both of them for now.

"OK, Captain – Simon. I'm sorry about the dramatic reaction, but I think once you've heard what I have to say, you'll understand it better. Because not only is it partly a 'Sentinel / Guide' thing that dictates my need to protect my Guide, but also because I feel responsible to a great extent for what happened..." and here he turned to face Blair on hearing his sharp intake of breath, knowing that the kid was about to deny it yet again.

"It's true, baby," he murmured, ignoring Simon again for a moment. "If it hadn't been for me pressuring you into helping me out, you would never have been exposed to all that sick stuff. Never have been hurt..."

At Banks' deliberate cough, he turned his attention back to his boss.

"Thing is, Captain, that I first met Blair when I arrested him the first time we attempted a bust at Stan Bartlett's Goldmine Studio. Blair was doing a photo shoot with a view to being signed up as a photographic model to earn some extra money for tuition fees and stuff at Rainier. As far as he was concerned, Bartlett was a perfectly legit photographer and modelling agent. He had no idea that we were investigating the guy for pornography and snuff movie-making.

"Anyhow, long story short, I convinced him to help me and my team by going undercover to dig up information so we could bust the guy properly next time.

"But it went wrong. I mean, yeah, we got Bartlett, but Blair was hurt. Molested and drugged by that bastard. All because of me."

"No, man. Please don't say that," whispered Blair, visibly upset at Jim's words. Turning to meet Simon's eyes, he said, "I wanted to help Jim once he had explained what Bartlett was doing. I

needed to do my bit, and it was my fault that I got hurt. S-S-Stan tried to blackmail me with some faked pornographic pictures of me, and I went to face him without backup. I didn't think... It was stupid of me, and my own fault..." and he dropped his head as his voice cracked on the last words.

"OK, let me get this straight," responded Simon. "You, Jim, persuaded an untrained civilian to get involved in one of Vice's operations even though you didn't even know him, am I right? What sort of department is Sullivan running?" This last question was an almost incredulous aside.

"How in Heaven's name could you justify it, man? Or did you think he was fair collateral damage?"

Surprisingly, Jim didn't retaliate with the expected angry denial, since his own guilt was never far beneath surface, however Blair might try to persuade him to drop it.

"I don't have any excuses to offer, sir. I'm not even sure I was thinking clearly at all beyond wanting to shut the bastard down. But I knew that there was already a connection between Blair and me. And it was Blair who recognised what was happening with me. He explained about the Sentinel stuff, and as far as I was concerned, he was meant to be mine. My Guide.

"I may have done a piss-poor job of keeping him safe that time, but I don't regret our connection. If it wasn't for him, I'd've eaten my gun by now. Or be bouncing off the walls in a rubber room somewhere!"

"Hmmm, yeah, well. That's as may be," replied Banks, trying to absorb everything he had heard thus far.

"I agree that I didn't know the details regarding that case. I mean, it was before I took over at MCU, and it didn't make trial, thanks to Bartlett dying in custody..."

"And that's another thing," he continued, frown deepening. "Although it was never confirmed, I understand that it was Bartlett's mafia connections who probably sanctioned the hit, wasn't it?"

Nodding grimly, Jim responded, squeezing Blair's hand when the younger man sighed unhappily. "Yeah, I think that's pretty much certain, Captain. We were never able to pin anything on Stephan or his principal hitman, Dade, but I'm sure it was an inside job, just to tie up loose ends. And you're wasting your time feeling sorry for the guy, Chief," he murmured softly to his Guide. "He was ready to kill you, baby, in the worst possible way. And make money out of the filming of it."

"I know, Jim," Blair replied. "But I hate to think of anyone dying like that – murdered in cold blood..."

Then, raising his head to look first at Jim, then at Simon, he visibly straightened up in his seat before continuing more strongly. "About the investigation, sir. I'll do it. I mean, yes, I'm scared, but it can't be anything like the last time. And I know Jim will be backing me up all the way. Right, Jim?" he added, the faintest tinge of uncertainty in his tone.

"Gods, Chief! What do you expect me to say?" Jim replied in amazement. "You know I'll protect you with my life, but are you sure you want to do this? Because this is going to dredge up some bad memories for sure."

Smiling softly into Jim's worried eyes, Blair's answer was gentle. "I know, Jim. But I also know that I need to do this. We need to work together if you're to keep doing your job, and if it means me having a few nightmares, then so be it. Like the captain says, it's about theft, not porn movies. And yes, I know it could still be dangerous, but I can't see it involving me in sleazy sex scenes and stuff this time. I'll do it, man. I want to do it."

Eyes now reflecting genuine respect for once where Sandburg was concerned, Simon spoke up again. "Thank you, Blair. You're right. I didn't understand exactly what you'd been through, but I'm

grateful that you've agreed to do this job anyway. I freely admit you've got more guts than I would have given you credit for under the circumstances.

"So, gentlemen. I suggest you take an early lunch, then meet back here at 2.00pm to discuss the operation in more detail. Dismissed!" He waved them out, already concentrating on the file on his desk, relieved that his plan had been accepted, however grudgingly, and looking forward to putting it into action.

By mutual consent, Jim drove Blair back to 852 Prospect for their early lunch, knowing that the pair had much to discuss and some serious reconnecting to do. Although Jim was seething inwardly at his Guide's apparent self-sacrifice in terms of the PD's requirements, he couldn't help but be impressed by the younger man's determination to do what he considered to be the 'Right Thing.' Oh yes, Jim considered him a naive, crazy fool, but a beloved one, and one who could no more deny his generous and giving nature than he could hold back the tide. And Jim wasn't even convinced that his Guide couldn't actually do that if push came to shove.

And more poignantly, Blair was doing it for him. For their partnership, and everything it meant to both of them.

For a split second, Jim was overwhelmed by fury at his beloved, if gullible Guide's single-minded and courageous resolve, but deep down he couldn't fault the young man's decision. And as always the depth of Blair's love left him breathless.

He didn't have to like it, though, and his anger was contained only with difficulty.

Then he looked over at the figure huddled miserably against the passenger side door, and his heart did a flip flop of guilty sympathy for the nervously trembling man staring out of the side window, heart hammering and the tang of unshed tears reaching Jim's sensitive nose.

"Hey, Chief. It's OK," he murmured, reaching out to squeeze Blair's thigh. "Don't panic, baby. We have time to discuss this, and I promise I won't get mad. Well, maybe a little," he added, grinning wryly, "But I won't hurt you, babe. You know that, right?"

And after a second or two, Blair met his eyes, saying, "Yeah, I know that, lover, really. It's just that this has thrown me for a loop. I mean, I guess I hadn't realised that Simon wasn't aware of our history other than the Sentinel aspect and my reason for requesting the ride-along. But surely we should have told him everything? I mean, I would still agree to go ahead with the investigation, but why didn't you tell him the rest, Jim?" and he fixed Jim with a genuinely perplexed expression.

Jim concentrated on his driving for a few moments while he considered the question, then took a few moments longer to formulate his response.

"Well, to be honest, baby, I think it comes into the 'need-to-know' department as far as Simon's concerned. It doesn't have any bearing on the upcoming case, and he has a hard enough time swallowing the sentinel stuff anyway. He's already had to do some pretty nifty tap dancing to convince the Chief and the Commissioner to let you partner me, and if he thinks there are any skeletons lurking in our shared closet that could draw unnecessary attention onto you, he might decide it's not worth the hassle to keep us in Major Crimes.

"And I'm not at all sure that any other department would have us either, despite our record so far. Even Mike didn't want to have a civilian on his team, and he thought a lot of you, kiddo. And you know I won't do this without you, Chief. If I can't have you as my partner, then I can't be a cop any longer, no two ways about it.

"Besides, thanks to Bartlett's demise, like it or not, you were spared going into the witness stand in that case, and the fallout from Davies' suicide had already been pretty much dealt with. It seems pointless to stir up that hornet's nest again, Blair. You don't need the adverse publicity."

Blair gazed at him for long moments before finally nodding in acceptance. He knew Jim was only trying to protect him, and in doing so, making sure that their partnership didn't suffer, because that was the all-important issue as far as Blair was concerned.

But he couldn't help worrying that his past might still sneak up and bite him in the ass at an inopportune moment, and a part of him was convinced that it would be better under those circumstances if Simon Banks was aware of the possibility in advance.

Turning back to look out of the side window, he spent the rest of the short trip remembering the other side of the Bartlett case, and the repercussions it might still have for him.

Unable to hold back the memories that rushed back to him, Blair recalled his situation eighteen months or so ago. A newly-appointed Teaching Assistant, and the proud recipient of his Master's degree at a mere twenty years of age, he had just signed up for his doctoral programme. Unfortunately, despite his excitement and well-deserved satisfaction at his achievements so far, he was also desperately short of the funds he needed for tuition fees, books, rent and even the means to feed himself.

Now Blair had been supporting himself since the age of sixteen when he had finally persuaded his evergreen hippy Mom that he wanted to settle down and study anthropology at Rainier – the university which coincidentally boasted his hero, Dr Eli Stoddard, as one of its tenured staff.

Lacking anything but the paltry stipend he received from his teaching post, and the grant monies he struggled to obtain, like so many impecunious students, Blair had been forced to seek part-time employment wherever he could find it.

Having been unsuccessful in his quest to find any job that paid anything more than a pittance, another TA, who worked in the Fine Arts department, told him of a position he should apply for. The only trouble was that it involved posing as the nude subject for Professor Davies' Human Anatomy study group, and Blair wasn't at all sure he could do such a thing.

Even though he had stayed in several naturist communes during his early years travelling with his peripatetic Mom, he was still rather body shy, and completely unable to understand why anyone should deem him attractive. Nevertheless, he desperately needed the funds, so he diffidently approached the senior Professor, and was greatly relieved to be approved.

As it had turned out, the whole thing turned out to be very successful. The poses Blair was required to hold were very simple and straight-forward and all the students very matter-of-fact about their model. Professor Davies professed himself to be so pleased that, once the modelling stint had finished, he suggested that Blair approach an ex-student of his who had specialised in fashion photography and was always on the alert for fresh talent for his agency.

Little did Blair realise at the time, the photographer, one Stan Bartlett, had far wider interests. With Davies' whole-hearted support, and clandestine mafia backing, Bartlett's most lucrative source of revenue was the creation and distribution of hard-core pornographic material, and snuff movies.

Blair had followed Davies' advice, and had signed up for a couple of photo shoots when he had inadvertently been arrested by Jim and his team of Vice cops, who were looking to shut down Bartlett's operation.

Although released without charge, Blair had quickly fallen under the spell of his Holy Grail, realising that Detective Jim Ellison was the modern Sentinel he had been seeking.

He had somewhat reluctantly agreed to go back undercover at Bartlett's studio, with the intention of procuring information about the man's new movie venture, and the experience had been very hard on him. He still had nightmares about the groping he had had to undergo at Stan's

hands, particularly when he had been caught out and set up as the next in line for snuff-movie 'stardom'.

Although rescued in time by Jim and his team, and Bartlett was arrested in flagrante, so to speak, the fallout from the case hadn't ended there.

Professor Davies had committed suicide rather than face the ignominy of being arrested and shunned by his academic peers, but not before he had sent copies of extremely graphic manipulated images of Blair to Chancellor Edwards, who had reacted in character by trying to have Blair dismissed from Rainier in disgrace.

Luckily for Blair, Captain Mike Sullivan had gone in to bat for him, and she had reluctantly withdrawn her intended action, but he was well aware that she only needed one more excuse to follow through on her threat. Ever since then, he had tiptoed carefully around her, working his ass off to keep up with his heavy workload at the U while also trying to back up Jim at the PD.

It was hardly surprising that he was exhausted much of the time, but he was determined to carry on regardless, because nothing meant more to him than being a proper Guide to Jim, even at the expense of his longed-for doctorate.

Just then, he was roused from his reverie by Jim's voice as he pulled in outside 852 Prospect.

"Come on, babe. Time to get something to eat – and do a little bonding, I'm thinking. I think we both need it, Junior!"

And Blair had to agree.

That night, the loft

Blair lay on the sofa in front of the TV, his head on a pillow on Jim's lap. It was a favourite position for both men, as Jim carded Blair's curls with a gentle hand, both giving and receiving comfort. Desultorily watching a Jags game replay on the screen, Blair found it hard to keep his eyes open, so exhausted was he after a day full of tension and soul-searching. He knew he had a pile of blue books awaiting marking, but couldn't find the energy right now to tackle the chore.

"Hey, baby, you still awake?" murmured Jim, smiling fondly down at the young face that turned up towards him at his soft words. Rolling over onto his back, Blair replied, "Yeah, Jim, but only just. I can't understand why I'm so pooped, and I've still got that marking to do, but I just can't seem to move. But it has to be done," he continued resignedly, and made to push himself upright with a deep sigh.

"You know very well why you're so tired, Darwin," responded Jim a trifle tartly, placing a large hand on Blair's chest to keep him in place.

"Neither of us was expecting a case like this new one, and for you, it's going to be particularly hard. You're emotionally involved, and that's enough to exhaust you, on top of your normal frenetic workload, so cut yourself some slack, baby. I'm sure you can catch up with the marking tomorrow, because Simon's not expecting you to come in to the PD. You can stay at the U for as long as you need, because you know I won't be doing anything exciting. I'm just going to be showing Manny the ropes until his real partner gets back, and I promise you that, if we go out of the office at all, I won't even think about trying to use the senses, sweetheart. Only with you, baby," and his smile widened at the love directed at him in Blair's blue gaze.

"Thanks, Jim. You always know what to say to make me feel good. Love you so much, man," and Blair grabbed the hand on his chest and pulled it up to his lips so he could kiss the palm. "I have to say I'm glad that Simon doesn't expect me to pursue this modelling gig for a few days at least. That's if I can even secure it!" he added with a small frown.

“But supposing I do get taken on, at least I’ll have a chance to get my work caught up with at the U first. I can make sure all my lecture notes are done, and the marking and grading are up to date. I’ve got a new diss chapter almost ready to hand in also, so that should keep my committee off my back for a while. And it could be worse, after all. It could go down during mid-terms. Or finals week!” and he pulled a mock-horrified face.

Then the humour drained abruptly from his face again, and his expression turned shy as he bit his lower lip for a few seconds before continuing.

Knowing exactly what his Guide was going to ask for, Jim’s body was already responding eagerly as Blair murmured diffidently, “Um, could we have an early night, Jim? I mean, I know we had a chance to cuddle a bit at lunchtime, and did a bit of reconnecting, but, um, if you wouldn’t mind, I could really do with the full bond...” and he tailed off, a delicate blush pinking his cheeks.

Jim’s smile widened as he shook his head slightly in fond exasperation. In the year and a half or so since they’d bonded, Blair was still uncertain of his place in Jim’s heart and home, despite Jim’s constant reassurances. Never big in the self-esteem department, Jim was sadly aware that Blair had never really had anyone or anything to call his own; his nomadic childhood preventing him from putting down roots or making real friendships. It still seemed to amaze him that Jim could want him for himself as much as for a Guide, but Jim was prepared to work on him for as long as it took to convince the young man that he was indispensable in Jim’s life and work.

“Oh Chief!” Jim replied gently, cupping the worried face in a warm palm. “When are you going to realise that you can ask me anytime you need to bond? You don’t have to wait for me to instigate it, baby. As far as I’m concerned, making love to you is no chore. You’re beautiful, desirable, and I love you. And if you want an early night, you bet I’m down with that!” and he wrapped his hands around Blair’s upper arms so he could pull the smaller man up and around to straddle his lap.

As Blair’s happy giggle broke free at the action, Jim pulled him in for a deep kiss before setting him on his feet.

“Up you go, sweetheart. I’ll just lock up down here and I’ll be right with you....”



Following morning, across town

Newly-promoted detective Emanuel ‘Manny’ Ignacio stared at himself in his bedroom mirror, frowning in critical appraisal as he straightened his tie yet again. He knew very well that the formal shirt and well-pressed suit were not prerequisite attire for the occupants of the MCU bullpen, but he decided that it did no harm to make an effort for his first day in his new role. If he could impress Captain Banks from the get-go, perhaps he would get a chance to be partnered with one of the

senior detectives, preferably Jim Ellison, although he realised there was little likelihood of that just yet.

Manny's handsome features creased in a sour grimace when he considered the chief obstacle in pursuing that goal, namely that little faggot, Sandburg, who dogged the big cop's footsteps at every move. And it wasn't just ambition that coloured Manny's view of the annoying student. He had good reason to hate the kid, and he believed that he had the means to destroy the little bastard's reputation at the PD for good if he used it carefully. He had been patient long enough, and now his promotion had come through, his plans could be finally put into action.

Oh yes, revenge was most definitely a dish best served cold.

With a final tug at his tie, Manny turned away from his reflection, his expression now spiteful and cunning as he anticipated Sandburg's downfall. Little faggot didn't belong in the PD for sure, and as far as Manny was concerned, shouldn't be at Rainier either. He was a slut and a user, no doubt about it.

Glancing around his shabby apartment with a jaundiced eye, Manny let himself out, thinking not for the first time how he intended to improve his surroundings as soon as possible. He knew he had the potential to be a good investigator, and his stint in uniform had impressed his Watch Commander. But he had a serious flaw even though he personally didn't consider it to be one. Manny was a dirty cop, like his father and grandfather before him – not that anyone in the Cascade PD were aware of the fact since they had been officers of the NYPD at the other side of the country. Sure, he was clever enough to conceal his actions, but he saw no reason why he shouldn't benefit from the occasional leak of information in the right ears, or why he should turn down the chance of a nice little cash bonus every so often. He simply needed to keep a low profile so as not to incur suspicion.

His older sister Maria felt the same way, and had never castigated him for his choices, as he had never criticised hers when they set out to create a future for themselves away from their suffocating family environment and the teeming city of New York.

And as he drove to the PD, his glowering expression deepened as he considered his beloved sibling, now struggling to rebuild her life in Tacoma.

Maria was a raven-haired beauty with a voluptuous figure. She had been one of the most popular models and 'porn stars' in Stan Bartlett's stable, until Ellison and his fellow Vice cops closed the studio down, forcing Maria to leave Cascade to avoid being caught up in the fallout. Strangely enough, Manny didn't blame Vice for doing their job, but he was deeply resentful of Sandburg's part in the operation.

When Blair had gone undercover at The Goldmine Studio, during one of the photo shoots he had been paired with Maria, and she had shown her brother one of the images of them together. Instantly recognising the student, Manny was able to warn her of the possibility of a sting, and she in turn warned Bartlett. The upshot was that Sandburg had been kidnapped, drugged, and molested, Bartlett fully intending for him to be the star of his next snuff movie. And as far as Manny was concerned, it was no more than the little faggot deserved.

However, he had been rescued in time by Ellison and his team, and since then had dug his claws so deeply into the big cop that they were inseparable, apparently at home as well as at the PD.

Remembering only too well Maria's distress at losing both her meal ticket and her home in Cascade, Manny considered his intended plan of action to be completely justified, and his smile became wolfish as he entered the PD's underground parking lot.

Same morning, #307, 852 Prospect

"You ready, Chief? I need to get going if I'm not to set Ignacio a bad example by being late for his first day!"

Jim chuckled at his Guide's muttered expletives from the bathroom where he was finishing up his ablutions. A few seconds later, Blair emerged, a completely unconvincing scowl on his face as he responded, "Yeah, yeah, man! Keep your hair on – such as it is. I'm here already!" and he burst into giggles at Jim's mock growl and ducked to avoid the gentle whap to the back of his head as he passed.

The sharp movement caused him to hiss very softly in discomfort, and Jim was instantly concerned for him.

"You OK, baby? Did I hurt you last night?"

"No, lover, I'm fine, honestly. I'm a bit sore, but it's a good kind of sore, man. We both needed the bond, and you know I'm always happy to do what you want," and Blair patted his arm as he grinned up into his Sentinel's worried eyes.

Swiftly scanning his lover, Jim realised that Blair was telling the truth, and any damage was minimal even as his scent and relaxed heart rate was evidence of his overall contentment. However, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt at having caused him even the slightest hurt. Offering Blair a reassuring smile, he placed a proprietary hand at the small of his Guide's back as he steered them both out of the loft, although his mind was on the previous night's activities.

When Blair had asked him for the full sexual bond, Jim had, as usual, been only too happy to cooperate. He had taken Blair passionately, dictating the pace and position, and Blair had adopted his customary submissive role, although his responses had left Jim in no doubt of his whole-hearted satisfaction at their mutual climax as the bond surged between them in a rush of light, love and comfort.

Jim was well aware that it suited him to be in the driver's seat in bed, and was grateful that not only did Blair allow it, but he had even explained why he thought this was right, at the very beginning of their relationship.

According to Blair, if the Guide was doing his or her job properly, then they had to assume a great deal of responsibility for their Sentinel's welfare, which included monitoring his or her environment as much as helping control their senses and providing backup. Although Blair didn't like pain, he was happy to relinquish control in bed to Jim, knowing that his Sentinel wouldn't deliberately hurt him, and in fact relished the opportunity to act as he saw fit as an Alpha male.

Normally, they both accepted the situation with equanimity, but on very rare occasions such as this, Jim felt a little uncomfortable with himself, although he was well aware that Blair wouldn't have it any other way.

Deliberately turning his thoughts towards a more mundane topic as he accompanied Blair out of the building, he said, "You still OK to cook dinner tonight, baby? I shouldn't be late back, especially as I'll probably be riding a desk most of the day. But I can pick something up if you're going to be too busy."

"Nah, I should be fine, Jim. Even if it's just a stir-fry, I'm happy to cook. I have one class to teach this morning, then office hours, and I should be able to catch up with last night's marking during lunch. There's a staff meeting this afternoon, but after that I'm coming straight home, so I'll have plenty of time to do dinner. And I'll want to hear all about how you get on with babysitting your new detective," he added with a mischievous grin.

Responding in kind, Jim gave Blair a quick squeeze, then climbed into his old jeep, waving at his lover as Blair's ancient Corvair trundled off in the direction of Rainier.

MCU bullpen, shortly after

When Jim breezed into the bullpen, he returned a few greetings as he made his way over to his desk. Henri 'H' Brown, another of Simon's 'new brooms' slapped him on the shoulder in passing, his jovial face creased in a wide grin as he said, "Hey, Jim, babe! So where's your shadow this morning? Still tucked up in bed?"

Although Jim's initial reaction might once have been to snap at the implied innuendo, Jim knew that the young African American detective was completely without malice, his idea of humour being as colourful and sometimes inappropriate as his loud Hawaiian shirts and odd leather cap.

Grinning in response, Jim replied, "No way, H. Blair's got a full day at the U today, otherwise he'd be here, and you know it!"

"Yeah, babe, I do. That kid sure understands what work's all about, for sure! Tell him I said 'hi' when you see him next," and H patted his shoulder again as he made his way out of the bullpen.

Turning his attention to Banks' office, Jim saw that the Captain had company, and he instinctively sought and catalogued the vaguely familiar scent. Sentinel recall identifying it as belonging to the new recruit, he wasn't surprised when Simon peered around the door, eyes lighting on Jim as he snapped peremptorily, "Ellison, my office!" before disappearing back inside.

Grinning wryly, Jim changed direction and knocked on the door, pushing it open to reveal the new detective sitting opposite Simon, looking very smart indeed in a suit and tie.

"Come on in, Jim and sit down. This is Detective Emanuel Ignacio, but I think you've already met?"

Jim nodded to the young man who smiled up at him, and held out his hand. "Yeah, Captain. I've seen Manny a few times out and about. Congratulations, Detective Ignacio, and welcome to MCU!"

Smile widening, Manny shook the offered hand. "Thanks, Detective Ellison. I'm glad to be here," he replied. "I hope I'll live up to your expectations!" and he grinned at both men, aware that his natural charm wasn't lost on them.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine, Manny, and call me Jim, OK?" the older cop replied. Then he looked over at Simon, eyebrow raised quizzically. "Any orders, Captain? Blair won't be in today, by the way – he's got a full day at the U."

Neither Jim nor Simon noticed the quick flash of distaste that crossed Manny's face at Jim's words, as Simon responded with somewhat forced jocularity. "No problem, Jim. I sometimes forget he's not a full-time staff member. Although I never forget he's not a cop! But since he's not in, I'd like you to get Manny here orientated, OK? I've heard from Marvin Anderson," he continued, turning his attention back to his new recruit, "and he says he should be OK to return to light duty tomorrow. So you won't be without your permanent partner for long."

"That's good news sir," responded Manny cheerfully. "But I'll try to make the most of Detec...I mean, Jim's...expertise for today," although inwardly he had his own ideas about who he'd like to be permanently partnered with, and it wasn't Marvin Anderson!

"OK then, Detectives! I expect to see you both hard at work the next time I look out the office. Dismissed!" and Banks chuckled as he ushered them out.

The next few hours turned out to be surprisingly satisfactory for Jim, considering he'd been expecting to be bored mindless with showing the rookie detective around. On the contrary, he

discovered that Manny was a pleasant and entertaining conversationalist as well as being smart and enthusiastic about his new role. The only time his grin seemed to slip a little was when Jim talked about Blair, which he tended to do rather a lot. However, the older man didn't take umbrage, assuming it was probably a little tiresome for Ignacio to be constantly regaled by Sandburg's exploits when he didn't really know the guy. And he certainly had no idea as to Blair's real place in Jim's life.

It was only later that afternoon when Jim became a little more puzzled by Manny's attitude towards his Guide, when they went to check out a couple of possible leads for a cold case Ignacio would be working on with Anderson when the veteran detective came back to work the following day.

Knowing that he would be highly unlikely to need to use his senses, Jim was happy to accompany Manny on a routine trip to the business district, intending only to offer moral support and a few pointers should the young man require them. Taking the jeep, since Jim insisted on driving, he was rather surprised when Manny actually brought up the subject of Blair's position at the PD, especially as he had seemed uncomfortable with the topic up until now.

"So, Jim. If you don't mind me asking, what exactly is the deal with Sandburg? I mean, I don't mean to pry, but I wondered why he was still hanging around with you at MCU. I mean, don't get me wrong. It's obvious from everything you told me this morning that he's very helpful around the bullpen, but why would you want him with you in the field? Wouldn't you be better off with a police partner?"

Controlling the urge to tell the guy to shut up and mind his own business only with a great effort, Jim frowned as he formulated a reasonable-sounding explanation. He realised he couldn't afford to provoke the rookie's suspicions, because the guy was plainly too smart for his own good. So Jim fell back on his and Blair's tried and trusted cover story, whilst mentally preparing himself for the likelihood of further probing. It was, after all, the truth, if not the whole truth.

"Well, since you'll be seeing a lot more of him around the bullpen, you might as well know the reason behind Blair's presence," Jim began, with obvious reluctance. "You already know he helped out with the Bartlett case while I was in Vice, huh? I mean, I know you were still in uniform then, but I recall seeing you a couple times during the investigation." At Manny's nod of confirmation, he continued. "OK then. Well. While Blair was undercover – voluntarily, I might add – his warehouse got burned down, so I let him move in with me. After all, it was me who persuaded him to get involved, so it was the least I could do. And he's a good roomie and has become a good friend.

"So when he told me he wanted to do his doctoral dissertation on closed societies like the Police and Fire Departments, I suggested he apply to Captain Banks for a ride-along pass so he could study me in action first-hand.

"And I found out he was the best partner I could wish for. He thinks on his feet, and has a formidable brain, so even if he isn't police trained, he backs me up every time, in whatever situation.

"Satisfied?" this last uttered in a somewhat threatening growl.

Realising he had overstepped the mark, Ignacio backed off, offering Jim an appeasing grin. "Sure, Jim! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get personal or upset you, man. Just wondered, is all. I mean, I didn't believe all those rumours anyhow..." and he deliberately tailed off, shrugging unconcernedly, but hoping Ellison would take the bait. He wasn't disappointed.

"And what 'rumours' would they be?" snarled Jim, by now thoroughly riled. "You might as well tell me, so I can set you straight, kid!"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry too much," replied Manny in a scoffing, throwaway tone, even though his heart rate had risen dramatically at Jim's reaction. "It's just that some of the other uniforms were saying that Sandburg must have a lot more to offer than office work to have held on to his

observer's pass for so long. He was a model after all, and with looks like that...Not that I hold with all that!" he added quickly as Jim growled again.

"Just thought you ought to know, Detective. No offence meant!" and he breathed an inner sigh of relief when Jim's angry scowl gradually faded.

"OK, Manny. None taken. And I appreciate you're being open with me. I do know that there are a few people in the PD who are less than charitable towards Blair. But they should know that the kid has my full support in his studies, and I'm more than grateful for his support in the field. And whatever goes on outside the MCU is no-one's business but our own," he ended with grim finality.

Manny realised that that was all the information he could expect to gain this time around. But the seeds of disquiet had been planted, and he was satisfied to leave it at that and change the subject to something less contentious.



The Loft, that evening

Jim still felt out of sorts when he let himself into #307 that evening. Although the remainder of his day with Ignacio had passed without further discord, both men resorting to inconsequential conversation for the most part, Jim couldn't help but feel discomfited by the young detective's remarks.

He knew very well that Blair's presence in the bullpen caused resentment among a few of his colleagues, but for the most part the pair of them disregarded the underlying discontent unless it threatened to affect their work together. But Ignacio's apparently innocently offered information had spooked Jim a little, and his protective instincts had undoubtedly been alerted. However, not wishing to worry his partner unnecessarily, he plastered on a smile which soon became genuine as he watched Blair's antics in the kitchen.

"Hey, babe! Something smells good! Whatcha doing?"

Spinning round to face him, Blair's face lit up in a beautiful smile as he waved a wooden spoon in Jim's direction. "Hey yourself, lover! I'm glad you're back early! I'm doing chicken Alfredo, and did you have a good day with Manny? Tell me all about it!"

Moving forward to wrap his arms around Blair's waist, Jim chuckled as he replied "Breathe, baby! Chicken Alfredo sounds great, and my day with Ignacio was so-so. Nothing exciting, but I'll tell you about it later if you really want to know.

"But for now, I want a kiss, then I'm going to freshen up a bit. And then you can feed me, sweetheart – after dinner, that is!" and he laughed outright at Blair's delightful blush, disturbing thoughts banished by his Guide's reassuring presence.

"Awwwww! You sweet-talker you!" his grinning lover responded. "Dinner'll be ready in about fifteen minutes, so you've got plenty of time to make yourself beautiful for me. Well, even more beautiful....!" and he pushed Jim away, sending him laughing on his way to the bathroom with a swat on the butt with the wooden spoon.

Part 3: A Reluctant Poster Boy

Over the next couple of days, Blair's presence in the bullpen was intermittent at best as he put long hours in at Rainier, making sure he was as up-to-date as possible with his obligations there. Although he missed his Guide's effervescence and companionship, Jim knew he couldn't fault Blair's commitment, knowing that devotion to duty was deeply instilled in the young man's character, even more so when it came to his duty to his Sentinel. And they both needed to be prepared to get Blair inside O'Brien's studio whenever the opportunity arose.

During Blair's absence, Jim had plenty of desk duty to keep him occupied, although he was able to follow up on a few leads when his Guide managed to make a brief appearance. He was also aware that Manny Ignacio made a point of socialising with him when appropriate, although the rookie was now being mentored by veteran Detective Marvin Anderson, his permanent partner. However, there were no untoward comments regarding Sandburg's presence – or, indeed, absence – other than a few genuine-sounding enquiries into the young man's health, so Jim felt able to relax his protective stance for the time being.

Jim was just finishing off a report, wistfully wishing Blair was here to type it for him, when he felt what they jokingly referred to as 'a disturbance in the Force', and he knew that his Guide had entered the building. Smiling in satisfaction, he monitored the young man's approach, listening to his happy voice as he called out greetings to his friends, and pleased that there were no hostile reactions that he could hear. His smile widened as Blair whirled into the bullpen in a flurry of waving hands and bright laughter, his face radiant as he approached Jim's desk.

"Hey, Jim! I finally got everything done, so I'm all yours for the rest of the day. What do you need, man?"

However, before Jim could respond, Simon stuck his head round his office door, barking, "Ellison, Sandburg! My office!"

Giving Jim a 'what did I do now?' look, Blair swallowed hard and turned to face the door, grateful for Jim's supportive hand in the small of his back.

"S'OK, Chief," murmured Jim reassuringly. "I don't think there's anything wrong. I hope", he added almost sotto voce.

Exchanging a conspiratorial grin, the two men approached the office, unaware of the sharp glance in their direction as Manny Ignacio followed their progress, mouth set in a grim line for a moment until he turned his attention back to the file he was studying.

As they entered Simon's inner sanctum, the Captain waved them to a seat, and held out a jug of his special coffee.

"Anyone want to test my latest blend?" he offered with a wry grin. "Still tastes like Maxwell House to me, but you're welcome to give it a shot!"

When both men accepted gratefully, he poured them each a mug before settling down behind his desk.

"Well now, I'm glad to see you here, Sandburg," he began, for once actually looking and sounding as if he meant it.

"There's been an interesting development in the O'Brien case, and I think we should grab the opportunity while we can," and he pushed a copy of an obviously expensive glossy magazine towards them.

"This is one of the more up-market Art and Antique magazines. Take a look at the second page of advertisements, gentlemen. This could be just what we're looking for!" He sat back, linking his hands across his stomach and smiling complacently as he watched their reactions.

It only took a moment for the two men to spot what he meant, as they both read and absorbed the contents of a large, eye-catching advertisement, centre-page. Rory O'Brien, of the International Gallery and Studio, Cascade, WA, was advertising for applications for experienced artists' models. Candidates to apply in person, bringing a portfolio of appropriate images....

For several moments, Blair was completely lost for words. Although they had been gearing up for just such an opportunity; now that it actually looked as if it was going ahead; his confidence melted like ice cubes in the sun.

"Um, yeah. I guess this is what we were waiting for. I mean, he's actually asking for potential models, so I'm not going to look too suspicious if I apply. But what if I'm not what he's looking for? And yes, I do have a portfolio," he added softly, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"It's OK, Chief," Jim butted in quickly. Turning his gaze to Simon, he continued, "Blair had already had a couple of photo shoots before we picked him up, and the ones immediately after were completely legit, so the photos are quite safe – and very attractive too, if only Blair could admit it!" he finished, sending a supportive grin in Blair's direction as he patted his Guide's hand comfortingly.

Simon's grin widened as he responded, "Even better, Sandburg! So, if you get down there, perhaps tomorrow afternoon, we could be in with a chance of setting this up.

"But Blair," he added, fixing the young man with an understanding gaze, "despite what you may think of me, I don't want to see you unnecessarily upset, or your reputation damaged. So don't go with it if something feels off, OK? I neither want nor need a civilian observer hurt on my watch, OK?"

And with a distinct feeling of relief, Blair smiled back, and said, "Thanks, Captain. It means a lot to me that you understand where I'm coming from. So if Jim agrees, I'll get down to the gallery tomorrow afternoon, and we'll take it from there."

Friday Afternoon

The following afternoon saw Blair approaching the entrance to the very impressive International Gallery and Studio in Cascade's affluent downtown area. Having finished his classes at Rainier for the day, he had arranged to meet with Jim after lunch to prepare for his attempt to secure an interview with O'Brien. At Jim's suggestion, he had taken a quick shower, and changed into more suitable clothing, and now, in Jim's opinion at least, looked good enough to eat.

As they drove towards the studio in Jim's jeep, Blair's knee bounced with nerves as the jittery young man clutched his slender portfolio to his chest, murmuring his calming mantra as he tried unsuccessfully to steady his racing heart.

Jim pulled into a parking space in the public lot near their destination, and looked over at his jumpy Guide, a concerned expression on his face.

"Come on, baby! Why did you agree to do this if you're so upset at the prospect?" Then he answered himself immediately, saying, "I know, I know! It wouldn't occur to you to do otherwise, would it? It's not in your nature, babe, and I love you for it. But it worries me too, you know. Because sometimes I think you ignore your instinct for self-preservation just to help me – or anyone else for that matter. You have a generous spirit, but it makes me feel frightened for you, and guilty that you're doing it for me."

"Oh Jim, please don't! I'm not that much of a saint, truly! It's just – I don't know – I don't like the idea of these guys stealing beautiful objects for gain when they should be enjoyed by everyone, not shut up in some rich man's basement for self-gratification and greed. It's not right, and the illegal trafficking of precious archaeological artefacts is as damaging for the country of origin as it is for those who have lost the opportunity to study them.

"And it's hardly surprising that it wasn't so long ago that archaeologists were considered to be little more than grave robbers – like a bunch of rabid Indiana Jones'!"

Suddenly he grinned cheekily at his lover. "Hey, guess what? All that ranting has made me feel much better! I'm good to go, Jim; honestly, because I know you'll be listening in on me. And besides, he probably won't give me a second glance anyway."

"As if!" came Jim's scoffing reply. "If he can't appreciate beauty when he sees it, then he's no artist. But if he is that indiscriminating, then Simon'll just have to come up with Plan B, and he can't fault you for trying. So, let's get this show on the road!" He climbed out of the truck to give Blair a quick hug as he emerged, before patting him on the shoulder and sending him on his way. He was relieved to note the lightening in Blair's mood, even though he couldn't help but worry. BPS wasn't something he could turn off at will, and he had no intention of even trying.

Turning to face the impressive facade of O'Brien's new gallery, Blair straightened his shoulders and marched determinedly up the steps to the entrance, face settling chameleon-like into a cheerfully confident smile. Although Jim's senses could pick out the rapid heartbeat and sub-vocal 'I am calm, I am relaxed' as Blair sought his centre, an ordinary observer would be unlikely to perceive the young man's internal disquiet.

Entering through the gallery's automatic doors, Blair quickly gazed about him, taking in the tastefully decorated lobby where a very decorative and well-dressed young woman sat at a large reception desk. As she looked up to fix him with a politely inquisitive gaze, Blair noted the name on her lapel badge, and approached the desk, a friendly grin accompanying his words.

"Hi, Cathy. My name's Blair Sandburg. Um, I'm here in answer to the advertisement I saw in 'Art and Antique World'", and he pulled the appropriate page out of his portfolio. "Is Mr O'Brien still looking for people?" he asked, and he looked hopefully at the receptionist, puppy dog eyes wide and pleading as he turned up the charm.

Despite her rather condescending air, she obviously wasn't immune to the Sandburg charisma, and out in the jeep, Jim grinned smugly as he listened in to the exchange.

"Well, now, Mr Sandburg," she began. "Rory has several vacancies to fill, as he has agreed to run a few art appreciation classes for hand-picked individuals as a personal favour for Mayor Grant. Part of the course content requires the students to observe the human form and practice their own drawing skills. It does require the models to pose nude, Mr Sandburg," she continued warningly, "So if you have a problem with that, it's best you leave now."

Although his grin slipped slightly, Blair was able to meet her frank gaze honestly. "Um, it's OK, Cathy. Although most of my experience has been in fashion photography, I did a stint as a model for Rainier's Fine Art department. I don't have a problem with nudity if it's needed. And please call me Blair."

Nodding in satisfaction, Cathy replied, "Right then, Blair. Although I obviously can't give you an answer myself, I'll go and see if Rory is free to see you. He and his partner, Veronica Maynard, like to interview all potential employees personally, in whatever capacity. Please take a seat, and I'll be back shortly."

Left alone in the lobby, Blair muttered quietly, knowing that Jim would be able to hear him. "So far, so good I guess, lover. But let's see what the man himself says. And this partner of his. Cathy's coming back, so wish me luck!" He beamed up at her as she said, "Rory can see you now, Blair. Please follow me," and she led him through the gallery towards an ornate door at the far end marked 'Private.'

As he followed the receptionist across the gallery, Blair took the opportunity to study his surroundings, and was very impressed with what he saw. The large area was beautifully laid out, well-lit and furnished at appropriate intervals with comfortable seating from which visitors and potential clients could view the artworks, which were displayed around the room, grouped according to the artist. He couldn't help but notice that one of the larger displays was of O'Brien's own canvases, and he recognised the artist's distinctive style from his brief association with Rainier's art department. He would have liked longer to wander the displays at leisure, but all too soon Cathy was knocking at the door, and holding it open for him to enter.

Blair found himself in a plush room, part office and part drawing room, where clients could be entertained in a cosy seating area. An adjoining door was slightly cracked open, and Blair could make out a brief glimpse of the working studio beyond. However, he was unable to do more than make a cursory study of the place as his attention was caught and held by the two occupants who were now studying him closely in his turn.

Rory O'Brien was easily recognisable from his frequent media coverage and was plainly unashamed to flaunt his status as the current darling of the art world. Tall and slender, his strawberry blonde hair was fashionably tousled, and worn long enough for him to have perfected the rather pretentious affectation of tossing it away from his brow with a flick of his left wrist. His eyes were a startlingly attractive green, and his pale skin lightly freckled. His features were regular, if not actually handsome, but his overall air of smug self-importance was offset by a wicked twinkle in his eye and a sardonic half-grin.

Blair was surprised to find himself immediately attracted to the man and responded with a wide smile of his own, happy to shake Rory's offered hand before taking the seat indicated in the group of informal overstuffed chairs in the seating area.

"Mr Sandburg – Blair," Rory began, his accent indicative of his European roots. "So good of you to come so quickly in response to my little advertisement. I have had one or two other responders, but no one who has yet taken my fancy, I have to admit. But I must say, my dear, you are utterly delicious! I can already see you as the darling of the rich old socialites who are clamouring to join my classes. And you never know," he continued with a knowing smirk, "One or two of them might actually manage to do you justice!"

"But let me introduce you to my partner Veronica Maynard. She is positively the best thing that could have happened to me!" He flicked an affectionate glance at the woman in question. "Veronica is PA, PR consultant, business and financial advisor and so much more. I simply wouldn't be here today without her!" He drew her forward to shake Blair's hand also.

Although Blair's smile didn't diminish, he was far less comfortable with Ms Maynard than with O'Brien. Veronica was a tall woman, possibly mid to late thirties, with long auburn hair and sherry-coloured eyes in an arrestingly beautiful face. Her long-legged and athletic figure was dressed in extremely tasteful and expensive designer clothes, successfully both showing off her considerable assets, and indicative of her averred business capability and her gift for understated sophistication. Although she also held out an elegant hand to Blair, and offered him a courteous smile, her shrewd

gaze raked him over and the eyes that bored speculatively into his sparked with intelligence, such that he was embarrassed to find himself feeling more gauche and awkward than he had experienced in a long time.

Rory, however, seemed to be blissfully unaware of the frisson of unease passing between his companions, and settled himself comfortably in the seat opposite Blair as Veronica perched elegantly on the one next to him, totally focussed on the interaction.

“Well now, Blair. Let’s see what you’ve got in that portfolio...” and the interview continued.

That night, the loft

Upstairs in their big bed, Jim lay quietly, taking a few minutes to contemplate his Guide and to consider the events of the afternoon. Blair lay draped across him in his sleeping position of choice – except for when Jim deliberately spooned protectively around him, needing to cuddle Blair close to him. A few of Blair’s stray curls tickled his nose, and he grinned fondly as his nostrils twitched in appreciation of the heady aroma of sleepy, sated and contented Guide.

Their love-making and bonding had been as passionate and mutually satisfying as always, but this time Jim had taken it upon himself to keep his touches gentle and arousing for his lover rather than demanding, wanting to prolong Blair’s pleasure. Also, truth be told, he wanted to make up for the previous session’s barely-controlled aggression which had left Blair a little tender, even if his lover had assured him that he was fine and had enjoyed the experience.

Dropping a soft kiss on top of the curly head, Jim considered himself supremely lucky to have found a lover as accommodating as Blair. And as a Guide, he could want no better. As Blair snuffled softly against his chest, Jim tightened his hold slightly, and thought about his responses to the visit to the gallery that afternoon.

When Blair had finally emerged from the gallery, his smile had still been in place, although Jim could make out the slightly distracted frown which indicated that his Guide was deep in thought. However, when he approached the jeep, his face lightened again as he opened the passenger door and slid inside, to be immediately taken into Jim’s arms. Although as a rule they restrained themselves from too obvious PDAs, on occasion Jim needed to indulge his desire for tactile reassurance, and this was one of them. Squeezing the shorter man tightly for a few moments before pushing him gently away, Jim contemplated his lover, using his senses to scan for any signs of distress.

Knowing where Jim was coming from, Blair smiled up at him, doing his best to reassure his Sentinel that everything was OK.

“I’m fine, Jim. And you’ll already have heard that I got the job, so mission accomplished so far. It’s no worse than I’ve done before, and I think Simon should be satisfied, so let’s get back to the bullpen and make our report, huh? You never know, if he’s happy enough with me, he might let us leave early,” and he waggled his eyebrows suggestively, knowing that Jim would undoubtedly need to bond in the privacy of their home to fully satisfy his inner Sentinel that their partnership was intact and unthreatened.

Jim knew very well that his Guide instinctively understood exactly what his Sentinel – and Jim, his lover - needed, and fully appreciated the fact, so he allowed himself to be temporarily pacified by Blair’s soothing tones.

“OK, Chief. You win, for now. But I have to say I’m not comfortable with every aspect of this plan. But I agree that we need to discuss this with Simon, and take it from there.”

So saying, he patted Blair's knee, and started the engine to drive them back to the PD.

Shortly after, Simon Banks' office

"So, Blair. If I understand you correctly, O'Brien has hired you provisionally to model for one of his private tuition groups, right? And you're OK with this?" Simon asked, his frowning gaze carefully studying the young man's reactions.

"Yeah, Captain, that's correct," replied Blair, firmly meeting the older man's direct gaze with one of his own. "I know Jim's not too happy about it," he continued, casting an apologetic glance at Jim's scowling face, "But I don't have a problem with it, sir. It's no more than I had to do for the students at Rainier, after all."

"Now there I have to disagree," growled Jim, far from happy to accept the plan so far.

"It's one thing to have bona fide art students studying you, Blair, but these rich old biddies are most likely just getting their jollies from seeing a beautiful young man displayed before them. I don't like it, babe. OK?"

"Oh Jim," responded Blair with a sigh. "I do understand where you're coming from, and I appreciate your concern, truly! But what makes you think that some so-called 'art students' aren't in there for a laugh also? I managed OK at Rainier, and I'm sure I can manage here also. I'm truly not naive enough to think they're all there simply for art's sake! And what's more," he added, redirecting his gaze to Simon, "Rory suggested that I might be suitable for including in his latest advertising campaign. You know; a sort of 'poster boy' for some facet of his new enterprise!" He tailed off, blushing shyly at the recollection of O'Brien's unforced enthusiasm for his own proposition.

"Anyway, whatever! Thing is, he has asked me to do my first 'sitting' on Tuesday night in the studio after the gallery has closed for the day. So if it's still what you want, Captain, I'm happy to run with it!" he finished, stubborn determination colouring his tone.

Simon sat back for a moment, both contemplating Blair's words and assessing their impact on his detective.

"OK Blair, Jim," he answered eventually. "Supposing we're going to do this, what else can you tell me about your first impressions of these guys?"

Happy to continue the discussion on less contentious grounds, Blair grinned as he ran with the question, excited to be asked to offer his opinion for once.

"Well, Captain, I have to say that I had no negative feelings as far as Rory was concerned.

"Yeah, I know you don't want to hear about 'vibes' and all, man," he continued apologetically, "But it's a fact that he didn't give me the slightest suspicion that he's anything but a successful, somewhat arrogant, if financially naive, artist.

"On the other hand, although I freely admit I have no expertise in that field other than a psych minor – call it 'gut instinct' if you will – I have serious concerns about his partner, Veronica Maynard.

"Now that lady is one seriously complex character, sir. Rory freely admitted that she's more than just a PA, and I got the distinct feeling that it's her that's actually running the show whatever Rory thinks. So it might be a good idea to do some in-depth research on her. Um, not that I want to tell you how to do your job or anything," he tailed off uncertainly; worried that he'd overstepped the mark.

Patting his Guide's knee supportively, Jim found himself compelled to agree.

"Blair's right, sir. Although I wasn't physically present, I could overhear the whole interview, and from what O'Brien said I can see where Blair's coming from. Same goes for Maynard's contributions. I think he's on the nail as to where the power lies, so if we want to investigate possible criminal activities, it's more likely to stem from O'Brien's 'advisors' than from O'Brien himself. I get the feeling he's just an unwitting but useful front to hide behind and to provide easy access to venues where artworks are ripe for the taking."

"And unfortunately" he continued unhappily, "I think that Blair might be the best option we have to obtain evidence for conviction. Not only does he now have an 'in' with them, but he's also one of the best researchers I know."

Frowning intently at his best investigative partnership, Banks took a long moment to pull his thoughts together before replying.

"OK, Blair. You've done well, kid. Better, I have to admit, than I expected. You've made some good observations, and as long as you're happy to go ahead, I'll give you the OK to carry on. Definitely for the research aspect, at least.

"Now I realise that this isn't easy for you to accept, Jim, but I really believe this plan could work, and I'm asking you to give your Guide a chance to carry it off.

"What do you say? Because I know that if you feel strongly enough about it, you'll never let Blair go in whatever he agrees.

"Can you accept the situation as it stands? Because I have to say, there's a lot riding on your answer. I'm going to be completely honest here. I was pretty pissed off when I realised what I'd been conned into in taking on your 'Sentinel / Guide' voodoo shit. OK, I admit it's been productive over the last year or so since Sandburg joined our happy band as a civilian observer, but as far as I'm concerned, it's cases like this that'll prove your worth in this department. Same goes for the Chief and Commissioner. They need to be convinced that their decision to let him stay on in the department way beyond his 90-day pass is justified, or whether you cut him loose and try to work without the benefit of the senses.

"What do you say?" he asked, and he fixed Jim with an unflinching stare.

Although Jim would have loved to act on his first instinct – to throw his Captain's words back in his face and tell him exactly what he could do with his ultimatum – one look at Blair's strained features, and his own sense of duty directed his response.

"OK, Simon. I don't like it, but I guess I never will when it comes to Blair deliberately putting himself in harm's way. But it's a worth-while case, and one which he's particularly suited to pursue.

"So yeah, it's a go. As long as you realise that I'll pull him out the moment I think he's in danger...?"

"Goes without saying, Jim. And thank you – both. Now, seeing as you don't have a huge backlog of cases, Detective Ellison, how about you take the weekend off? Take a little time to yourselves, and see you first thing Monday!" Simon chuckled as he waved them to the door, congratulating himself on a job well done.

Same evening, across town

As Jim finally succumbed to much-welcomed slumber, in his apartment across town Manny Ignacio stared unblinkingly at the peeling plaster ceiling above his bed. He was well aware that sleep would be a long time coming tonight, but for once he wasn't complaining.

Because he had plans for the weekend, and by Monday, he fully expected to savour his longed-for revenge against a certain hippy-boy fag.

When Manny had still been in uniform, he had been one of the first on scene last year when Professor Davies committed suicide by hanging himself in his office at Rainier's Art Department. Manny, already angry at Sandburg's involvement with the closing of the Goldmine Studio, had managed to catch a good look at the Professor's suicide note, which had been printed on the back of an extremely graphic digital manipulation which superimposed Sandburg's face on one of the sexual participants.

Guessing correctly that there were more where that came from, he had approached his buddy in charge of the Evidence Store, and had managed to 'borrow' a few of the most explicit images in Bartlett's and Davies' confiscated collections. Quickly scanning and saving them onto a flash drive at a nearby internet café, he had returned them unnoticed and bided his time until he could put them to good use.

Having achieved his goal of passing his detective's exams and getting assigned to MCU, he knew that soon he would get the opportunity to put the little shit in his place. And after jealously watching Sandburg and Ellison in Banks' office that afternoon, plainly involved in the sort of case he should be doing – not buried under piles of useless cold case files and being lectured to by the pedantic Anderson – he deemed the time was right.

Manny had already printed off plenty of hard copies of the images, which he intended to surreptitiously pass on to some of his old buddies in uniform for distribution throughout Central PD, knowing that they despised Sandburg as a manipulative Jewish fag bastard who had Ellison wrapped around his little finger. Despite Cascade PD's assertion that it tolerated no prejudice of any sort, there were still plenty of neo-fascist rednecks around who ignored the claim, and weren't afraid to act on their beliefs if they thought they could get away with it.

However, Manny had other plans also, which he hoped would prove to be far more damaging to Sandburg's reputation.

Come Sunday, he intended to visit another internet café some distance away, where he would create a temporary account. Using the flash drive, he intended to email the images anonymously as attachments to several select addresses within the PD, such as the Chief of Police, the Commissioner, and Captain Banks. He might even target some of the administrators' for good measure.

Once they got a good look at what Sandburg had been involved in, whether or not he was an innocent dupe, Manny was certain that the ridicule and disgust his little offering would provoke would be more than enough to warrant pulling Sandburg's undeserved observer's pass. The PD's powers-that-be would surely want to distance themselves from the potential embarrassment caused by the worthless little shit however much Jim Ellison may (or may not) protest. Once the student was history in the department, Manny would make his play to be partnered with Ellison, fully believing that he deserved the position, and, once there, determined to make the most of it.

And as for Sandburg, let's see how he liked losing his credibility and his friends, and probably even his cosy billet with Ellison, just as Maria had suffered months ago.

Smiling smugly, he punched his pillow and settled down finally to sleep, sure that his dreams tonight would be more than satisfying.

Part 4: A Threat from Within

By 8.30 am on Monday morning, Blair was already jogging up the steps to Hargrove Hall, humming cheerfully as he enjoyed the rare Cascade sunshine. He felt relaxed and happy, having spent some much-appreciated quality time with Jim. They had used the opportunity of the shared

free weekend to chill out and unwind; doing as little as possible except for some recreational fishing and hiking in the Cascade National Forest, followed by some very satisfactory reaffirming bonding and lovemaking. In short, Blair felt more positive and contented with his lot than he ever remembered BJE – Before Jim Ellison – and he didn't even try to keep the beaming smile from his face.

Indeed, Blair's palpable exuberance and good cheer seemed to energise even the most jaded of hung-over students dragging themselves in for their dreaded early Monday classes, such that they exchanged more or less coherent greetings with him, and passed on by feeling almost human.

His good mood lasted until he reached his untidy desk in his tiny storage-room-cum-office, and he plopped himself down in his battered desk chair, already reaching into his ever-present backpack for the lecture notes for his first class of the day.

Just then, his cell phone – which for once he had remembered to charge up without Jim's nagging – trilled its signature ringtone (the opening bars of the 'Indiana Jones' theme tune, care of his Sentinel's dubious sense of humour).

Grinning happily, he noted the caller's ID, and responded cheerily.

"Hey, Jim! Missing me already? Got to say that I'm missing you, lover. Anything you need me to collect before I come into the PD this afternoon?"

However, his pleasure died instantly as he listened to Jim's harshly-delivered reply.

"Listen, kiddo, you have to get in here a.s.a.p. Find some excuse to get away, and I'll meet you in the parking garage. It's urgent, baby. Don't argue if you want our partnership to have any chance of surviving. Just trust me, and get your ass over here now."

"B-b-but what is it, Jim? I can't just drop everything! You know how Chancellor Edwards feels about me! Is it something I've done? Please, Jim, tell me!"

His Sentinel's tone moderated slightly as he registered his lover's distress. "Look, Chief – Blair. It's not your fault, but it could have serious repercussions for both of us. Please don't question me now. Just get over here, and we'll try to defuse the situation. Don't argue, baby. Just come, OK?"

Feeling as if his very world was imploding, Blair swallowed hard as he formed his reply.

"OK, Jim. I'll call one of the other TAs who owes me a favour. She'll cover my morning class for me, I'm sure. Um...see you as soon as I can, OK?" and he terminated the call, absently noting that his hand was shaking hard as he placed the cell phone carefully down on his desk.

One hour later, Cascade PD parking garage

As Blair pulled in to his usual parking space next to Jim's jeep, he could already see his lover waiting beside the elevator, and wasn't surprised when the big man strode over to reach him as he climbed out of the car. Before he could even say a word, his already shaken confidence receded even further at the expression on Jim's face. The Sentinel was in full BPS mode, on high alert, and Blair knew he wasn't going to get a rational response to his questions until they reached wherever his lover perceived to be a safe and defensible location. Allowing himself to be gathered protectively against Jim's side, he was hustled to the elevator to travel up to the MCU on the sixth floor.

However, although no one made any attempt to get in the car with them, what with Jim growling and snarling like a large, predatory cat, Blair was peripherally aware of sniggers and a few looks of outright disgust levelled at him by the few uniformed cops who were also present in the garage. The same happened at the other floors the car stopped at on the way up, until Blair was almost going crazy with suspense and nervous speculation.

Although he knew that his Guide was desperate to question him, Jim merely snapped, "Not now, Chief!" and kept up his guard until the doors opened at the sixth floor.

Gathering Blair to him again, he hustled the young man through the bullpen, ignoring the whispers and glances which followed them, until they reached Simon's office door. Knocking sharply, he opened it even as the captain's gruff voice granted admission, and pushed Blair inside, shutting it firmly behind them.

Simon scowled fiercely at the pair, preparing to launch into his planned diatribe, when he was halted by a glance at Sandburg's face. Pausing a moment for a harder look, Banks was taken aback by the outright terror in the young man's wide eyes. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights, plainly on the verge of a panic attack, his unfeigned confusion confirming that he was obviously completely unaware of the reason behind the present crisis.

Breathing deeply to control himself instead of indulging in his fierce desire to rant at his men, he moderated his tone with difficulty, and ground out, "Sit down, Sandburg, before you fall down. You too, Ellison. I take it you haven't clued Blair in on what's been happening?"

Shaking his head, Jim replied, voice grim. "No sir. I just wanted to get Blair here safely before scaring him even more. Although I guess anticipation can be almost as bad, eh, Chief?" he added ruefully as he reached over to squeeze Blair's knee, meeting his Guide's anxious gaze, his own eyes now telegraphing love and understanding.

Too distressed to reply, Blair simply nodded jerkily, and turned his attention back to the captain, plainly needing to hear the worst without further delay.

Sighing heavily, and with a grimace of pure revulsion twisting his features, Simon pulled a sheet of paper out of his desk drawer and handed it wordlessly to Blair. Taking it in trembling fingers, Blair stared disbelievingly at the contents for long moments as his world crashed down about his ears.

Stricken with horror, he registered that it was a printout of an email sent directly to Simon's personal PD address from an anonymous source who signed him or herself as 'pdprotector'. Apart from that, it contained nothing more than a simple 'FYI', and full-colour images of four of the most obscene examples of Bartlett's pornographic manipulations, in each of which the 'Sandburg' character took the lead role.

Shutting his eyes tightly against the vile scenes, Blair began to hyperventilate as his face drained dramatically of all colour, and he swayed dizzily in panicked reaction. As the paper drifted to the floor from nerveless fingers, Jim swiftly gathered up the sagging body and pulled his Guide almost onto his lap as Simon looked on, genuine concern in his expression.

As Jim muttered soothing words in Blair's ear, and rubbed large, comforting circles on his shaking back, he glanced over at Simon, nodding tightly in thanks as the captain held out a bottle of water.

"Come on, Chief. Deep breaths, kiddo. Find your centre, or whatever you tell me to do, babe. It's OK. Come on, now. Take a sip or two of this...."

Long moments later, Blair managed to get himself under some sort of control, and sat up, pushing himself away slightly, but squeezing Jim's forearm in gratitude for his support. Peeking up at Simon in embarrassment, he whispered, "Sorry, sir. Didn't mean to wig out like that. Just a shock, man, you know?"

"Understandable, kid. Quite understandable," responded Simon, surprising himself with his uncharacteristic empathy.

"I take it these are samples of the pornographic pictures Bartlett tried to blackmail you with?" he asked, and he wasn't surprised when Blair nodded meekly, face now flushed in shame, and looking like he was fighting very hard not to burst into tears.

"Thought as much judging by Jim's reaction when I showed him earlier. Got to say, they're pretty damn sick even if they are well-executed, so I'm not surprised you're so upset.

"Thing is, kid, as you can see on the printout, this was sent late Sunday night, and not just to my address. I'm sorry to say that it also went to the Chief, the Commissioner, and to several of the office administrators also.

"And to make matters worse, hard copies have been circulating around the building for hours now. Every time they get spotted and confiscated by the Watch Commanders and senior administrators, new ones appear to take their place. It's like a nightmare feeding frenzy with you – and Jim – as lunch.

"Anyhow, before I take this to the Chief to try and contain the damage, is there anything else you can tell me about these pictures? Where they might have originated?"

Automatically looking to Jim for his nod of approval before speaking, Blair turned back to face Banks, impressing the Captain with his fortitude under the circumstances.

Visibly straightening his spine, the young man swallowed hard before commencing, his voice soft and low-toned in evidence of his deep distress.

"Um, yeah, Captain. There is more you should know, although whether it's relevant to this situation, I don't know.

"See, it wasn't only Stan Bartlett who wanted to blackmail me into joining his stable. Professor Davies from Rainier's Fine Art department did too. He had a particular interest in Stan's porn empire, since Stan was a student of his before setting up The Goldmine Studio. They both had sets of Stan's pictures, but Davies told me that they hadn't been distributed - and wouldn't be – as long as I accepted their offer. He...he said that they were looking forward to getting their hands on the 'real thing', not making do with digital mock-ups. I was so angry, I went straight off to confront Stan, and that was when I got grabbed. Stupid, huh?" He ducked his head briefly in mortification.

"Anyhow, after Stan's arrest, Davies committed suicide, but not before sending copies to Chancellor Edwards to try and get me dismissed.

"But I thought all Stan's material had been confiscated and locked away in Evidence. Prof Davies' copies too, as Jim's colleagues from Vice went out of their way to collect them from his apartment as a favour to me – to us" and he glanced imploringly at Jim.

"I mean, I know it's kind of naive for me to assume that they were telling the truth when they said there were no others, but if that's the case, then how did these get out? And since they're both dead now, the evidence was never required for trial," and he shook the paper in his hand in consternation.

"Hold on a minute, Chief," Jim broke in, taking up the thread of the discussion. "What about the set in Edwards' hands? You said yourself she has it in for you. Do you think she could have done this?"

Blair eyes narrowed in thought for long moments before he responded, plainly contemplating his lover's suggestion. Finally he shook his head, including Simon in his glance as he said, "No, Jim. I don't think she would. When Captain Sullivan confronted her on my behalf, he said he was certain he'd convinced her that it was against Rainier's best interests to take the matter any further.

"I don't like the woman, but she's nothing if not committed to ensuring the U's continuing prosperity. I'm sure this has nothing to do with her, and she's destroyed her copies like she told Mike Sullivan that she would. The last thing she'd want is any adverse publicity even if she couldn't care less about what happens to me."

"So let me get this straight," Simon growled, looking from one to the other in visible irritation.

"You both say that all the sets of pictures you're aware of have been either destroyed or seized as evidence. So are you saying that you think these copies come from within the PD? From someone who took them from the Evidence Store? Because if you are, that's one hell of an accusation to make, so you'd damn well better be prepared to back up your theory with hard facts!" He sat back, glaring at the pair in annoyance.

When Blair shrank back in the face of the Captain's angry declaration, Jim immediately retaliated, glaring at his boss in his turn, ice-blue eyes glinting in simmering rage.

"Dammit, Simon, you know I don't want to believe it, but you can't deny it's a real possibility. Hell, I know you don't want to believe it, and I'm sure as shit Blair doesn't want to either. But what else can you suggest? Who else but someone in the PD would want to break us up? Can you think of anyone other than a disgruntled cop who could gain from this?"

"Come on, Simon," he continued, a beseeching note entering his tone. "You know there's always been mutterings about Blair still being here, partnered with me. Speculation as to why you're prepared to put up with him. More than a few cops are jealous of his apparent privileged status in Major Crimes despite the evidence in front of their eyes as to how important his contribution has been. And let's not even mention the racist homophobic bigots who still manage to creep under the radar..."

Impressed despite himself at the fervour in Ellison's tone, Simon finally sighed again, and relaxed his aggressive posture. Face now wearing a look of weary resignation, he replied, "OK, Jim. I hear you. I still don't like it, but I concede that you may have a point. Trouble is, as long as this Sentinel shit is kept on a need-to-know basis, this is the sort of thing I guess we're going to keep facing. I just hope it's worth it – and that I can also convince TPTB that it is. The dissertation cover story looks flimsier by the minute to the unenlightened, and you know it.

"Look, Sandburg's almost ready to go into melt-down. Why don't you take him home and get him settled, eh? I'm going to go see the Chief and the Commissioner, and see what we can do about all this mess. I'll call you as soon as I have anything to report, but meanwhile, keep your heads down. Both of you!" He waved his hand in dismissal.

Once again, the drive back to the loft was completed in virtual silence, with both men wrapped in their own thoughts. The return trip to the parking garage had been a repeat of the unpleasantness encountered on the way in, and had left both men, Blair in particular, shaken to the core. Although no one had dared to actually confront them, thanks to Jim's overt aggression and protective stance over his Guide, there were plenty of snide comments and lecherous stares, almost all of which were directed at Blair. By the time they had reached the sanctuary of Jim's truck, Blair was almost in tears, his hurt and shame cutting Jim to the quick such that the older man was equally torn between sympathy and the desire to comfort his Guide, and a desperate need to seek out whoever was responsible for Blair's pain, and tear him – or her – limb from limb.

Pulling up outside 852 Prospect, Jim switched off the engine and turned to face Blair, heart contracting in compassion at the devastation on his lover's face. Keeping his tone gentle so as not to cause any more hurt, he took hold of Blair's hand and pulled the unresisting body towards him. Hugging him close, he whispered, "Come on, baby. Let's get you inside. We have a bit of reconnecting to do, because you need to know you're not alone. Never alone again, lover."

And Blair peered up at him from beneath tear-damp lashes, and nodded wordlessly, unable to speak around the lump of emotion clogging his throat.

As soon as they were safely inside #307, Blair turned to Jim and wrapped his arms around his waist, clinging as if afraid he was about to be pushed away despite Jim's words of reassurance.

"I'm so sorry, Jim! So sorry! This is all my fault. If I lose my pass, you'll be stuck without a Guide, but if your secret gets out, you could be in danger! It terrifies me that criminals could find out how to use your senses against you, and what about clandestine organisations wanting to study you?"

"Oh man! It's like all my greatest fears have materialised, and it's all because of me and my stupid attempt to earn some extra money!" He broke down in tears, his frame wracked with sobs as his arms tightened even more around his beloved Sentinel.

Although desperate to respond to Blair's frightened words, Jim waited patiently while Blair cried, simply cuddling the shaking body close and ignoring the spreading wet patch on his shoulder until his Guide was calm enough to listen to his reply. Once Blair had quieted to wet sniffles and occasional hiccupping sobs, he gently pushed the younger man away and held him at arm's length as he looked into the wet and red-rimmed blue eyes.

"OK, baby. It's my turn now, so are you ready to listen to me? Please don't be afraid, Blair. Not of me, anyhow. Come on, Chief. Let's sit down and get comfortable, OK?" and he led his Guide over to the nearest loveseat, and settled them both down, Blair on his lap.

Grabbing a handful of tissues from the box on the coffee table, he paused until Blair had mopped his eyes and face and blown his nose, shooting Jim a look of abject apology as he did so.

Taking a deep breath, he marshalled his thoughts and began.

"First off, baby, how do you figure that you caused this all by yourself? I mean, you needed extra money, and it should have been a good way to earn it. You weren't to know that Bartlett was a greedy, amoral bastard. And after our first failed attempt at busting the guy, it was me that coerced you into going back again on the Vice Unit's behalf. If anyone's to blame, love, it's me. For being a hard-nosed cop, determined to close the case by whatever means available, and for being greedy on my own behalf." At Blair's quizzical glance, he continued with a wry grin.

"Because I knew I wanted you from the first time I saw you in that interview room, even though I didn't know why. And once you explained about the Sentinel stuff, I couldn't have been more relieved – or more certain that I needed to keep you to myself, even if I fought against it for long enough!"

"And it's as much my fault as yours, if not more so, that I insisted on keeping our relationship secret from most of the PD, both on a personal and Sentinel / Guide level. I thought I was protecting you from unnecessary harassment, and myself from being seen as a freak of nature.

"And now it seems we've been outed on both counts, from a completely unforeseen source. If we're to have any chance of weathering this storm, and tracking down the culprit, I can't see any other option.

"I'll just have to come out and 'fess up about my abilities, and your role in controlling them, and live with the consequences."

As he finished speaking, he smiled ruefully into the anxious face before him, and gently tucked a stray curl behind Blair's ear. Blair's eyes were wide with fear and anxiety, and his teeth worried his full lower lip as he struggled to digest the full impact of Jim's words.

"Oh man, do you think it really has to come down to that? I mean, maybe if I keep away for a while, and you keep your senses dialled down when I'm not with you, people might eventually forget. It's not like I'm a paid consultant or anything, so they'd soon lose interest in me if I wasn't around anymore. Perhaps I could arrange to meet up with you when you need me to back you up in the field, without me coming into the PD at all? It won't be as good, but you can keep your job, and your secret, Jim, and I'll still be here for you outside of work, won't I?" This last was said a little uncertainly as Blair's underlying insecurity surfaced again despite his best efforts at suppressing it.

“Hey, kiddo, I hope you’re not implying that I’m about to kick you out of your home!” Jim replied with a mock-frown, tapping Blair’s nose with an admonishing finger.

“Whatever happens, baby, this bond is for life, no question! But although I appreciate what you’re saying, Chief, I don’t see how such an arrangement could work long-term. And if I can’t do my job properly without you at my side, then I don’t want to do it at all.

“No, Blair. We’ll wait and see what Simon comes back with, but if push comes to shove, then I’m coming clean about the senses, and we’ll take it from there,” and he silenced Blair’s automatic protest in the best possible way – by claiming his Guide’s beautiful mouth in a deep and reassuring kiss.



Following morning, the loft

Jim watched worriedly as his haggard partner shuffled around the loft, dispirited and quiet. Although he had seen Blair upset before, especially in the early days of their relationship, he had never yet seen such utter despair. Usually brimming with enthusiasm and energy, normally when troubled, Blair tended to either vent or meditate, then shake it off and resume his natural demeanour. This time, however, he seemed to have the weight of the world on his shoulders, and, having spent the previous night bonding and comforting each other, Jim knew that most of Blair’s pain wasn’t on his own behalf. Instead, he was desperately concerned with his Sentinel’s well-being; terrified at what might befall Jim should he come forward about his abilities. Even though Jim had done his utmost to convince Blair that the problem wasn’t of his making, he realised that his Guide was so deeply committed to him, that the threat of disclosure worried him beyond rationality.

Sighing deeply, Jim refrained from snapping at his lover in irritation, knowing that it would do no good other than to hurt the young man even more. After all, he realised he should be gratified that he meant so much to such a loving and unselfish partner, and knew also that there was nothing he wouldn’t do to protect his Guide. Snagging Blair as he wandered distractedly past on his way from office to kitchen, Jim pulled him round to face him as he studied the tired eyes.

“You OK, baby? Done everything you needed to? Because Simon called when you were in the office, and he’s coming round in a couple of hours. He said he wanted to discuss his meeting with TPTB, and he’s driving your car back.”

Unsurprised at the immediate flash of anxiety in Blair’s eyes, and the sudden tension in the body beneath his hands, Jim did his best to offer comfort and understanding; waiting until Blair relaxed again, shoulders slumping and expression turning to one of resignation.

"Sorry, Jim. I know I'm being a pain. I don't mean to be, honest. I just can't seem to shake off this feeling of dread. Anyway, yeah, I've called my students to rearrange today's tutorials, and Julie is happy to let me have her notes from today's lecture, so I shouldn't miss out too much on that. But I should go in tomorrow, Jim. I can't take any more time off without alerting Edwards. She'd just love to use absenteeism as another reason to push for my dismissal."

"I know, baby, and I agree. The last thing I want is for your job at the U to suffer because you're doing your best to back me up. I do appreciate everything you do for me. I know I don't say it enough, but thank you, lover."

"Oh Jim, you don't need to say so, although I admit it's nice to hear the words. You show me every day how much you care, and you look after me too. I've never felt so loved before, or needed, and I can't tell you how much it means to me. Even Naomi never needed me that much, and was quite happy to leave me at Rainier and get on with her own life.

"Come to think of it, it's nearly two years since I saw her last", he murmured, eyes taking on a faraway look. "I think it was a flying visit just after I got my Masters. You know," he continued, jerking back to the present, "She still doesn't know about us. She'll have a cow!" and this time he chuckled a little, eyes lighting up briefly in rueful amusement.

Knowing what he thought of Blair's ditzzy Mom, but willing to let it ride rather than hurt Blair unnecessarily with acerbic comments, Jim simply smiled at the resurgence of a touch of spirit in Blair's attitude.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, baby! But I can hear your old junker approaching, so Simon's just about to arrive. Let's see what he has to report, eh?" He grinned wickedly at Blair's expected mock-squint at the disparaging comment about his beloved Corvair before turning to put on a fresh pot of coffee knowing that their boss would appreciate the gesture.

A short while later, Simon sat opposite Jim and Blair, sipping appreciatively at a mug of fresh coffee, and studying the pair sitting pressed closely together before him. Although he knew that Jim's anger wasn't directed at him personally, he shivered inwardly at the barely-controlled rage simmering inside the man, held in check purely by the gentle grounding touch of his Guide, whose hand instinctively rubbed soothingly over Jim's denim-clad thigh. As for Sandburg, the kid looked truly spooked and close to tears as he anticipated Simon's tidings, obviously certain that the captain had nothing good to report.

Setting his mug down, Simon knew he couldn't put off the conversation any longer, even though he was honest enough to admit to himself that he was more than a little worried as to how Jim was likely to react. He was no coward, however, and his heart clenched in unexpected sympathy as he regarded the nervous grad student, whose huge blue eyes telegraphed his trepidation.

"OK, guys, let's get this show on the road. I apologise for taking my time getting settled, but we have a lot to discuss, and I have no intention of going off half-cocked. You deserve to hear the full content of my meetings, both last night and this morning, and all I ask is that you hear me out before diving in with the questions OK?" Once he had received two affirmative nods, and Jim's firm, "Yes, sir!" echoed by Blair's softer, "Yes, Si-er-Captain Banks..." he began.

"OK then. Well, first off, I have to say that I've had to do some pretty fast footwork on your behalf, so I hope you both appreciate it! Don't look so frightened, kid," he said more gently, directing his words at Blair. "Despite their irritation – well, fury, really – at the mess this situation has kicked up, both the Chief and Commissioner admit that it's not your fault. They're not stupid, and they could easily see the manipulations for what they are, and they are both willing to accept my – and Mike Sullivan's word – that you would never willingly be party to smut like that. They both

agree that it's a deliberate attempt by person or persons unknown to blacken your character for some reason, and are equally enraged at how it's spread so quickly throughout the PD."

Turning to include Jim in his glance, he continued more soberly. "However, despite their sympathy, I have to say that their first response was to demand that I cut Blair loose from MCU, because neither of them want nor need this sort of mud-slinging to reach the ears of the media. It's bad enough that morale is already adversely affected, but the PD itself wouldn't be shown in a very good light, particularly in view of the Chief's very public recent declaration that Cascade PD had zero tolerance for any type of bigotry within its ranks. They would really prefer to offer you a private apology, then sever all ties in the hope that things will return to normal sooner rather than later."

Holding up his hand to check Jim's instinctive impulse to respond, he said quickly, "Just wait a minute, Jim! Let me finish!

"Having said that, believe it or not they're both honourable men underneath all that political tap-dancing, and also don't want to give up their pet Sentinel and Guide team without a fight. I think we all feel that the benefits of your partnership outweigh their discomfort zone, at least for the present, so they're prepared to act on your behalf. Especially as you're on the top of this year's shortlist for 'Cop of the Year' again," and he chuckled at Jim's sour grimace.

"And no, they don't expect you to 'come out' as a Sentinel yet, Jim, unless you choose to. Although that's something you may both want to consider further on down the line. It would go a long way to explaining to your colleagues why Blair is still hanging around with you. But I don't want to discuss that option now. I just want to relay to you what they've decided to do. And it's already been set in motion, so just listen up, and contain your impatience for another couple of minutes.

"The first step is that they have already composed and issued a high priority internal memo, which condemns the release of the pictures and clears Blair of any misconduct. It also demands the destruction of all copies of the pictures, and states that anyone seen with one after today will be disciplined. And since they reluctantly concede that the whole nasty affair probably originates from an internal source, they are determined to instigate an immediate investigation to track down the culprit.

"So, that's how things stand at the moment. OK so far?" He sat back, carefully studying their reactions.

Unsurprisingly, it was Blair who engaged his attention first. Throughout Simon's explanation, the young man's face had mirrored his tumultuous emotions, from fear, shame, and shock through to amazement and tentative hope.

"Oh man," he breathed. "Oh Simon! I don't know what to say! Thank you. Thank you so much! I was so sure the Chief would want nothing more to do with me – so frightened that Jim would have to try to stop using his senses. It's wonderful news, man!"

Simon couldn't help but grin in response to the heart-felt words, but he knew he had a few caveats to add which would no doubt temper Blair's response. And meeting Jim's shrewd gaze, he knew that his detective was on the same page.

"Not to rain on your parade, son, - and you're most welcome, by the way – you do realise that it's not quite as simple as that? We still have to track down whoever's responsible, and despite the threat of retribution, there's sure to be a few knuckle-dragging bigots who'll continue to try to make your life a misery. I know Jim'll be watching your back every moment he can, but you should restrict your movements within the building when he's not around, OK?"

"Yeah, man. I know. Really, I understand. I've always had to put up with a certain amount of hazing, Simon." Blair smiled ruefully at the older man's concerned expression. "I was always too smart, too small, and too unconventional as a kid, what with all the travelling around we did. And Naomi was so far from the norm as a Mom it wasn't surprising that other kids used to try to get a

rise out of me by insulting her. Add to that the fact that I'm a Jewish bastard, and, well, you get the picture!" He shrugged one shoulder, trying unsuccessfully to exhibit a nonchalance he did not feel.

Knowing exactly what his lover was trying to do, Jim casually wrapped an arm about Blair's shoulders and hugged him for a moment, meeting Simon's understanding look over Blair's head.

"Thanks, Simon. Don't worry. I'll be watching Blair even more carefully from now on. And we'll keep as low a profile as possible for the time being, OK? Blair has plenty to keep him occupied at the U, and I can manage just fine for a lot of the time if I'm not using the senses. Although I prefer to have him with me to type my reports," he added with a grin, snickering as Blair made a half-hearted attempt at swatting him upside the head. His face hardened again, however, and his eyes grew steely when he continued. "But I'm going to do my utmost to find who's behind this, sir. No one threatens my Guide and gets away with it. No one!"

"Understood, Ellison. Just make sure when you find them, you keep the bloodshed to a minimum, OK? Blair doesn't need to visit you in prison for murder!"

Acting quickly to lighten the tension that had sprung up between them, Blair changed the topic even as he patted Jim's knee comfortingly.

"Um, Captain, do you want to continue with the O'Brien case? Because I have an appointment to sit for his first art class tonight...?"

Grinning in relief both for the change of subject and at this evidence of Blair's resilience, Simon replied gratefully. "Yes, Blair. If you're up for it, then I'd be only too happy for you to go ahead. OK with you, Jim?"

And they turned their attention to the upcoming investigation, all other unpleasantness set aside for the moment.

Part 5: Picture Perfect

Jim dropped Simon back at the PD, but didn't go in, at Simon's suggestion.

"Give it until tomorrow, Jim, to let the dust settle a little more. If the Chief's memo has done the trick and nipped this fiasco in the bud, then provided Blair keeps a low profile for a while, I'm hoping that most folks' attention will be diverted to something new soon enough – maybe even their casework!" He chuckled wryly at the unlikelihood of that. Then he continued more soberly, "But I know I don't have to tell you to keep an eye – and ear - open for threats to Blair. I admit I'm worried on his behalf. I've grown to like that kid, even though I'll deny it if you ever mention it to him! He's a regular pain in the ass a lot of the time, and his constant chatter drives me nuts, but I recognise that he's good for you, Jim, and he's helped a lot with several tricky cases. He doesn't deserve this crap, for sure."

Nodding his agreement, Jim replied gratefully, "Thanks, Simon. It means a lot to me – and Blair – that you're standing by us. It's not every captain who'd want to go to the trouble, and we really appreciate it. I know Blair desperately wants to help out with this latest case, because he feels it's the least he can do. And, for what it's worth, I'll do my best to keep my temper once I come in tomorrow.

"But if I get any inkling about who might have started this shit, I'll let you know immediately. It won't do Blair any good for me to be suspended for smashing some bastard's face in!" He grinned sardonically at Simon's pained grimace.

"Good enough, Jim. Now, let me out, and get back to your Guide. I'll wait for your report after tonight's sitting; see if we're on to a potential winner. Take care, and see you first thing in the

morning!" He climbed down from the jeep and strode over to the elevators without a backward glance.

Arriving back at the loft, Jim found himself with an armful of clinging Guide. As Blair hugged him hard, he was instantly aware of the nervous thrumming of the beloved heartbeat, and the taint of anxiety in Blair's enticing scent.

"Hey, baby! Calm down, lover! What's got you rattled like this? I thought you were OK with what Simon told us!"

"I'm sorry, Jim. I feel like a total wimp, but I suddenly thought, well, if some cops think this is bad - I mean me, involved in porn somehow - what will they think if it gets out that we're together? I mean, as far as I'm concerned, it's the best thing that ever happened to me, but I'd never forgive myself if some homophobic bigot didn't back you up on the street because of me!"

Pushing his lover away a little so he could meet the worried gaze, Jim smiled grimly as he replied. "You know, kiddo, I really appreciate your concern, but what makes you think they don't believe that already, baby? I haven't wanted to worry you, and until now, it didn't seem unduly threatening. I've heard plenty of speculative comments, and some outright abusive ones, but there've always been enough good people around to slap them down. You're way more popular than you might think baby!" and he cupped Blair's cheek in his large, warm palm.

"The gay issue is always going to be there, but I'd hoped that if we didn't rub it in to peoples' faces, they'd be happy with the 'don't ask, don't tell' concept.

"Unfortunately, though, because of this deliberate attempt to destroy your character, it may stir up more nastiness amongst the worst of the old-school rednecks, and that's why Simon - and me - want you to keep your head down. No one hurts my Guide and gets away with it. No one!"

Pulling Blair back towards him, the pair hugged each other for a few more minutes, giving and receiving comfort, before separating again.

"Well, I don't know about you, baby, but I've got an unexpected day off, so what say we make the most of our down time and go for a short hike in the National Park? We'll get back in plenty of time for you to get to your appointment at the gallery!"

And Blair agreed with alacrity.

Later that evening, the International Gallery and Studio

At 6.30 pm precisely Blair walked up the steps to the International Gallery to be met by Cathy, who was shrugging on her coat in preparation for leaving now the gallery was officially closed to the public for the day.

"Hi, Blair! Please go on through to the studio. Rory's waiting for you, and most of his 'students' have already arrived. Hope everything goes OK, and that you enjoy yourself!" She patted his shoulder amicably as she walked to the front doors, intent on shutting up shop and going home.

Smiling in response, Blair replied, "'Night Cathy! See you later!" before turning to face the half open doorway to the studio, murmuring under his breath for the benefit of Sentinel ears, "Here goes nothing, Big Guy! Wish me luck!"

Open and unaffected grin in place, Blair crossed the gallery to the studio door, assuming a nonchalant and relaxed demeanour as he entered.

As soon as his presence was acknowledged, Rory hurried over to greet him, holding out both hands to envelop Blair in a warm but unthreatening hug.

"Darling! So glad you could make it! Meet my new students! They're all dying to get a good look at your beautiful body, my dear!" he added in an undertone.

Gently but insistently drawing Blair forward, Rory continued, "Here he is, darlings! Your picture perfect model! Now, I know you're all going to absolutely adore one another, so let me introduce you.

"Ladies, meet Blair Sandburg. He's everything I could have wished for in a live model, so I hope you all appreciate it!" He grinned disarmingly, plainly convinced that his audience just had to be on the same page.

As for Blair, although he could feel a tinge of pink highlighting his cheeks, he carefully concealed his automatic shyness, and turned on the renowned Sandburg charm, such that by the time he had shaken hands with all six of the older ladies present – including the Mayor's sister-in-law – they were all interacting like good friends.

Slipping into a side room to shed his clothes, he murmured for Jim's benefit, "OK so far, Jim. They all seem friendly enough, although the Mayor's sister-in-law is a little bit familiar! Not sure if you should clue him in, though, lover! Anyhow, I'm all set, so see you in an hour or so!" He slipped on the towelling robe Rory had supplied for him, and smiling amiably, approached the chaise-longue where Rory waited to position him for the sitting.

Two hours later, Blair emerged from the gallery, and headed for his Corvair. Jim watched closely as his Guide crossed over to the old car, pleased when Blair whispered, "All OK, Jim. Tell you all about it when we get back to the loft, but I think you – and Simon'll be pleased. See you in a few!" He climbed into his car, started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot.

Less than twenty minutes later, both men were settled down on the sofa, beer in hand and with Blair pressed closely in to Jim's side.

"Well, lover? I could tell that everything seemed satisfactory, but what were the old biddies like? I suspect that more than one of them had you in mind for 'toy-boy' material! This panther won't tolerate cougars on his turf!"

Giggling at his partner's comment, yet aware of the Sentinel's slightly jealous undertone, Blair smiled adoringly up into Jim's quizzical face, and replied honestly, "Nah, Jim. Not really. I mean, luckily they liked me well enough – a couple of them even made a very fair attempt at drawing me – but they were all completely polite and well-behaved. Rory was very professional in his tuition. No mincing his words, and totally focussed, so I think all the ladies knew exactly what he believed they were there for.

"That's not to say that one or two might have harboured a few more risqué thoughts, but Rory had them well under control.

"And they all wanted me to pose for them again, so it looks like I'm all set for a few more sessions at least. Let's just hope I'll be able to actually uncover the information you and Simon need...."

Somewhat mollified by his Guide's words, Jim smiled fondly down at his warm armful and purred, "That's great, baby! Got to say I didn't really get any bad vibes from the whole session, even if I admit to being uncomfortable with a bunch of old dears getting to ogle my lover! If you're comfortable with everything so far, then who am I to make waves? Just as long as I know you're mine, and mine alone...!" he ended in a predatory growl.

And Blair smiled up at him, eyes widening in love and lust as he replied, "Oh yes, Jim! Yours only – and I should so like you to give me a demonstration....!"

And his wish was Jim's command.

Next morning, Cascade PD

Jim pulled up in his usual space in the parking garage and sat for a moment before leaving his vehicle. He could see several other arrivals waiting by the elevators already, and carefully extended his hearing to check if there were any hostile observations directed at him. Not that he could care less on his own account, but any untoward remarks about Blair would have earned a snarling response at the least.

On this occasion, Jim was glad that Blair had a full day at the U, and had reluctantly agreed with him and Simon to avoid the PD for the next day or so. A couple of the uniforms had spotted his arrival, and although they refrained from actually commenting, their sniggers and barely-concealed animosity was only too obvious to their target. Scowl firmly in place, Jim slammed the door of his jeep and stalked towards the group, unconsciously moving with the stealth and grace of his panther spirit guide, so that the culprits swiftly blanked their faces and turned nervously towards the elevators, undoubtedly relieved when the doors opened for them. For a second, Jim contemplated increasing his pace so as to get into the same car, when a voice behind him stopped him in his tracks.

"Hey, Jim! Wait up!" and he turned to see a dapper young man hurrying to catch up to him.

Angelo Mancini was a detective from the Vice unit with whom Jim had worked on several occasions, including the Bartlett case when he had first met Blair. Mancini and his usual partner, Barney Fellowes, had both gotten to know and like the young man, and were two of the few members of the unit, apart from Captain Mike Sullivan, for whom Jim had a real respect. Grinning wryly and looking the other man up and down, he responded amiably, "Hey, Angelo! Looking good there as usual. How's Barney?"

Grinning in his turn, Mancini replied, "He's fine, Jim. We've got a couple of cases ongoing, and he's working undercover at a bar right now, trying to identify the ringleaders of a new drug-dealing enterprise working out of downtown. The suspects are no great shakes in the smarts department, though, so we're hoping for a quick bust." Face and tone growing sombre, he continued, "Look, Jim, I'm really sorry about that business with Blair. He OK?" When Jim nodded grimly, he studied the older man for a moment then said, "You know Barney and me wouldn't release that crap, don't you? And we're as certain as we can be that we got all the copies of the pictures we knew about. So I guess some bastard must have stolen them from Evidence, right?"

"Yeah, my friend. Looks that way," Jim replied, "and if I ever find out who did it, they'll wish they'd never been born!" he added threateningly, his cold-eyed and sinister expression giving Mancini no reason to doubt his determination. Clapping Jim's shoulder, he said, "I hear you, brother. And if Barney and I learn anything, we'll let you know, OK?"

"Thanks, Angelo, I appreciate your support. And I know Blair will also when he comes in. Kid's going to need friends he can trust." Then, mood lightening somewhat, they entered the newly-arrived elevator car, chatting companionably until Mancini got out at the Vice Unit's floor, saying, "Later, Jim!" as he took his leave.

For the rest of the short trip to MCU, Jim didn't hear any particularly ribald comments, or confront anyone face-to-face, but he was well aware of a few surreptitious glances tracking his progress, as well as the occasional furtive snicker, but no more so than he supposed he should expect under the circumstances. It didn't improve his mood however, so that by the time he entered the bullpen, he was seething with anger and disgust at the attitude of some of his so-called fellow officers.

As he approached his desk, he was waylaid by H, who whapped him on the bicep in a friendly gesture.

"Hey, Jimbo! Good to see you, man. Blair coming in later?"

"Hi, Brown. No, not today. He's doing a full one at the U again, but he might pop in tomorrow, depending on the workload. Unless I think it's not a good idea," he added soberly, frown deepening between his brows.

"Hey, man, I hear you!" responded H with genuine sympathy. "Look, man. There're a lot more folks on Blair's side than you might think, although I can understand why you're both wary. But give the rest of us a chance, Jim. We'll look out for Blair, no problem!"

Face relaxing onto a genuine grin, Jim responded gratefully, "Thanks, H. It's good to know that the people we care about feel the same way about us. We can deal with the assholes as long as our friends stick with us, so thanks again. And now it looks as if I'm wanted..." and even as he and H turned towards the office, sharing an amused smirk, Simon's face appeared around the door, bellowing, "Ellison! My office, now!"

As Jim closed the door behind him, Simon indicated the chair in front of his desk.

"Take a seat, Jim. Coffee?" and he waved a freshly-made pot towards his friend. When Jim agreed gratefully, he fixed them both a mug, then settled down opposite.

"How's Blair, Jim? He at the U today?"

"Yeah, Simon. He's got quite a bit to do, so it wasn't too hard to persuade him to stay away from the PD today. And he's agreed to keep his head down for the next few days also until we see how the land lies. Got to say I've heard some pretty nasty comments and caught a fair few sidelong glances, but I've also had some good offers of support, so I guess it's not all bad."

"That's good to hear, Jim. Let's hope this mess'll blow over more quickly than we thought. After all, although I hate to say it, it's not everyone who accepted Blair with open arms anyway, so he's always had to put up with a certain amount of jealousy and unpleasantness.

"But as far as the clerical staff goes, according to Rhonda, they're virtually all rooting for him, so woe betide anyone who they think are giving their favourite observer a hard time! There could be a lot of lost paperwork in those poor saps' futures!" He chuckled wickedly at the thought.

Grinning in response, Jim visibly relaxed a little more as he replied, "That's really good to know, Simon. If anyone can help smooth things over for Blair, it's Rhonda and her teammates, and I'm very grateful to her for it. I know Blair will be so relieved also, although I also know it hurts him to feel as if his presence stirs up unnecessary antipathy. He's such a peace-loving soul normally.

"Anyway," Jim continued on a more positive note. "Blair did his first sitting as agreed last night, and it seemed to go very well. There were half a dozen of Cascade's wealthier ladies present, and from what I could overhear, and what Blair reported later, O'Brien was very satisfied with him, so much so that he's asked Blair to pose for two sessions each week for at least the next month. So all being well, if there's anything to learn, Blair should be in a good position to do it."

"That's great news, Jim. Tell Blair well done from me, and let's hope we catch an early break. Meanwhile, there're a few reports needing your attention to keep you busy for today, so I won't keep you any longer." Simon grinned unsympathetically at Jim's assumed scowl.

"Thanks, Boss, you're too kind," Jim muttered dryly, and Simon laughed out loud as he ushered his detective out of his office.

Over the next few days, the atmosphere in the PD as far as Blair was concerned gradually returned to something approaching normal. As promised, he had limited his presence, and never

strayed from Jim's side, unless accompanied by one of their trusted friends like H or Rhonda. Although there were still some overt sneers and not a few critical comments from the die-hard bigots, the majority of personnel heeded the threat of discipline and let the matter drop. True, Blair didn't obtain instant undivided popularity, but as Simon had said previously, there had always been a few less talented individuals who were jealous of Blair's apparently easy access to the elite MCU and who weren't afraid to make their disgust clear.

There was one in particular, however, whose all-consuming rage and disappointment was eating away at him, and Manny Ignacio was now more determined than ever to make Blair suffer for his failure to be thrown out of the PD on his multi-pierced ear.

Despite maintaining a cheerful and friendly exterior, Manny's inner demons continued to gnaw at him, and he constantly worried over why his plan should have had such limited success. Sure, he was gratified that a few of his cronies were still aggressively opposed to Blair remaining in the PD, and did his utmost to surreptitiously fan the flames of discontent as much as possible. He was even more pleased that one or two were angry enough to threaten actual bodily harm to the grad student, should the opportunity arise wherein they could carry out their threat with impunity. However, he was completely bewildered as to why the 'brass' should back the little creep to such an extent.

Jeez, the kid wasn't even on the payroll, but the Chief, Commissioner, and Banks were apparently all prepared to put up with the mouthy little twerp, and as for Jim Ellison, he was now so protective of Sandburg, no one dared to so much as sniff in the kid's direction in Ellison's presence.

So much for pushing for a new partnership with the likely 'Cop of the Year'!

Manny's problem, of course, was that he, like the vast majority of Cascade PD personnel, was still completely unaware of the Sentinel / Guide phenomenon, the value and importance of which was enough to protect Jim and Blair from the effects of what could be considered as glorified mud-slinging. There was nothing for it but to take more drastic action, and for Maria's sake, Manny was prepared to do just that.

Decision made, he watched and waited, all smiles and supportive attitude while he considered just how to send Sandburg on his way for good.

Part 6: Broken Image

International Gallery and Studio, several days later

Veronica Maynard carefully replaced the handset on its cradle as she terminated her call, a small frown creasing her brow as her lips tightened in discontent. On the face of it, her latest 'transaction' seemed to be all set to go, but this time she had a distinctly uneasy feeling about it. No doubt dear, sweet, naive Rory would attribute it to 'female intuition', and her lip curled in disdain at the thought. But whatever it was, she determined to remain on high alert until the deal was completed to her satisfaction. She had a reputation to maintain on two levels after all. The public one was of a successful business partner to an internationally acclaimed artist; someone who was best placed to oversee his finances and sell his canvases at the most competitive prices to his many admirers.

On the other hand, she was also known by the darker side of the art-dealers' world as a woman who could be trusted to deliver desirable, rare, and ultra-expensive stolen and smuggled artefacts to private collectors throughout Europe and the Americas.

Her method was simple enough in theory, deliberately kept so to minimise possible problems. In the early years of her career, she had become a successful independent dealer, making a more than comfortable living at buying and selling artwork of all types to wealthy individuals and institutions alike. Building up a network of contacts, her agile brain had gradually turned to the adrenaline-fuelled, but very lucrative sideline of receiving and selling stolen property. She had been amazed to discover how big the market actually was in the acquisition and re-sale of illegally-obtained artefacts, and she wanted a piece of the action.

Her big break had come when she had hooked up with up-and-coming artist, Rory O'Brien.

Quickly realising the gifted man's potential, she had made herself indispensable to him, gradually taking over more and more responsibility for the man himself, his artistic output and his business ventures. Using his presence as an invited guest as a perfect screen for seeking out and accessing suitable objets d'art from locations as diverse as Paris, Berlin, London, and New York, she would arrange for a trusted team of professional thieves to acquire the property, which would be hidden away in various secret caches until required.

In many cases, she would be working on commission, charged with obtaining a specific object or type of artefact for particular clients. In others, she would obtain the goods first, and spread the word amongst her known customer base until someone rose to the bait.

Once a suitable interested party had been contacted, and a price agreed, the transaction was simple enough.

The buyer would purchase a genuine O'Brien canvas, complete with full documentation, provenance, and legitimate invoices to satisfy Customs officials, and any other interested parties who might witness the delivery of the shipment. However, once through the necessary checkpoints, her contacts would arrange to meet up with the delivery van, bringing with them the stolen goods which had been smuggled to the appropriate location via clandestine routes and means. The tame delivery men would then take charge of the goods, and on arrival at their destination, the O'Brien original could be hung quite openly for public display, while the stolen artefact or painting was spirited away into the client's private collection.

Obviously an operation on this scale didn't fall under the auspices of one single mastermind, and Veronica was only one of several like-minded operators in their network, but their security was as tight as they could make it, and they had worked hard at earning each other's trust.

And, like the others, Veronica knew that, should she ever be compromised, she would never implicate her colleagues.

It was quite simply more than her life was worth.

And now here they were in their latest venture in the Pacific North West. Certainly Cascade wasn't at the hub of the international art scene, whatever the rather whimsical name of the gallery suggested. But its busy docks were well-placed to allow her to extend her nefarious interests to include artefacts smuggled from the Pacific Rim and even the indigenous peoples of South America once she had established a local network of contacts.

And Rory could enjoy himself painting and teaching the local socialites the skill of art appreciation. Perfect.

But she still couldn't shake her uneasy feeling.

Finally, with an impatient shake of her head, she rose from behind her desk, intending to visit the studio next door to check on how Rory was progressing with his latest creation. She needed a distraction, and if good for nothing else, Rory could always provide her with that.

Entering the studio, Veronica saw that there were several ladies present, all gazing in rapture at the young model posing before them, and plainly listening intently to every word Rory was saying as he instructed them in their art class.

Smiling wryly, Veronica realised that her business had taken longer than she had thought, and that she had lost track of time somewhat. She had barely registered that the gallery had closed for the day, and Rory's private tuition session was well under way.

Unperturbed, she sat quietly and unremarked on a nearby chair, content to watch her partner who was plainly enjoying the opportunity to share his love of the art world with his new group of well-heeled sycophants.

And undoubtedly enjoying the opportunity to ogle the rather beautiful young model also, she mused rather cynically.

Although she and Rory enjoyed a very satisfying sexual relationship, they were neither of them exclusive, and she was well aware of Rory's bisexuality. And the lovely young Mr Sandburg was just the type of tasty morsel Rory would love to get his hands on. And Veronica didn't mind at all, since such dalliances diverted her partner from showing untoward interest in her side of the business, and that suited her completely.

Over the next week or so, Blair endured several more sittings at the studio, but still without discovering any evidence of clandestine activity. In truth, he didn't really mind the sessions, because despite his overt personal interest in Blair, Rory had so far kept the classes very professional and his hands to himself. Besides which, Blair knew that Jim was listening in to every word, and was ready to ride to the rescue at the first hint of danger or impropriety. He was getting a little frustrated at his lack of progress, however, and said as much to his lover after the most recent session.

"You know, Jim, I don't think this is getting us anywhere. I mean, it was a good idea of Simon's, but I'm never given the opportunity of nosing around anywhere but the actual studio. Veronica always seems to be working in the office, and when she's done, she locks it up and comes in to watch Rory until the end of the class. Then we all leave together as you know. I just don't know how I'm going to get my hands on anything of interest."

"I hear you, Chief," replied Jim, frowning in his turn. "And it's not as if Maynard's giving me any clues either, babe. When I listen in to her telephone conversations, there's very little to indicate that she's involved in anything but legitimate business. I mean, she's probably using some sort of code if she's as successful a crook as we think she is, but 'probable' is no use in a forensic context unless words are matched by actions."

"I think you're right, and we should report back to Simon tomorrow. See what he says about pulling you out. You've done your best, love, and he can't say otherwise. It's time to consider another approach."

What neither of them realised was that there was another individual who took an avid interest in Blair's activities, and he wasn't in the least concerned about whether the undercover operation was successful or not.

Although not actively involved in their case, Manny had begun to follow Blair whenever he got the chance, and had asked some of his friends on patrol to keep him informed if they should spot the young man out and about. He had been careful enough so far so as not to have aroused Jim's suspicions, and had been greatly interested to learn of Blair's assignments at the International Gallery and Studio. Especially since his friends in a passing unit had reported that Ellison was observed sitting close by in his jeep, apparently keeping tabs on his little slut.

Deciding that this was too good of an opportunity to waste, Manny placed an anonymous phone call through to Veronica Maynard, advising her that their new model was a police informant who just might be looking for evidence that their art dealership wasn't entirely above board....

Following morning, Simon's office, MCU

A deep frown between his brows, Simon Banks contemplated his visitors above his steepled fingertips, silently digesting the information they had reluctantly offered.

Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he responded, well aware of the nervous expression playing over Blair's mobile features.

"OK, guys. I have to say I agree with your conclusions, even if I don't like it. It was a fair attempt, and it's not your fault that nothing came of it, Sandburg, so you can stop looking like a kicked puppy, kid," he added, directing a wry grin at the younger man.

"Tell you what, guys. Seeing as Blair has one more session booked for tonight, why don't you two carry on as planned, then as from tomorrow we'll put our heads together, and see if we can come up with some more potential avenues to explore. I'm sure your fertile brain can come up with something, Sandburg!

"Are you staying at the PD for now, or do you have to get back to Rainier?"

A grin of pure relief lighting his face, Blair replied, "Thanks for being so understanding, Captain. I'm truly sorry I couldn't find anything useful, but I'm happy to stay involved in the investigation in whatever capacity. And I'm happy to do this last sitting also, although I guess I'll have to come up with a plausible reason for 'retiring!'

"But I'm afraid I won't be able to stay this afternoon, because I have office hours I can't put off any longer.

"You'll be OK without me, Jim?" he added, fixing his lover with a worried gaze.

Grinning in response, Jim chuckled, "Sure, kiddo! I know Simon has some paperwork with my name on it, so, much as I'd like for you to stay and show off your typing skills, you're good to go. I'll just walk you down to the garage, OK?" this directed at both Blair and Simon, since they were all three still on their guard against any possible residual antipathy towards the observer.

Waving them off, Simon mock-growled, "Go! Get some work done! And see you tomorrow kid..." and he turned to the file already open on his desk, concentrating on the next item on his heavy schedule.

That afternoon, Blair's office, Hargrove Hall

Blair stretched his arms above his head, and rolled his head and neck to alleviate the stiffness with which several hours of dealing with angsty students had left him. Grinning wryly to himself, he knew he should be used to it by now: kids who left everything to the last minute before suddenly realising mid-terms loomed, and term papers hadn't been done. And he always did his best to help them out, deserving or not.

But he would be glad to get out today, knowing that Jim wanted to have dinner with him and do a little reconnecting before they set out for his last sitting for O'Brien's art class.

Pulling his battered backpack out from under his desk, he began to stuff it with papers and a set of blue books when there was a sharp rap on his door. Sighing at the thought that yet another student wanted a last-minute pep-talk, he called out "Enter!" even as the door was pushed open

without ceremony to reveal none other than Veronica Maynard, accompanied by a very large, and very tough-looking goon.

And Veronica was calmly pointing a 9mm pistol directly at Blair's mid-section.

Vaguely recognising the man as one of the delivery drivers who he occasionally glimpsed at the studio, Blair's eyes darted around, automatically seeking help, or a means of escape even though realistically he knew it was impossible unless Jim was close enough to gallop to the rescue. And that was hardly likely since they had agreed to meet up back at the loft.

Finally meeting Veronica's cold gaze with resignation, he swallowed hard as she said, "I think we need to have a little chat, Mr Sandburg. Come along now, and don't make any attempt to escape or raise the alarm, or I shall have to hurt you. And anyone foolish enough to come to your rescue!" She moved to Blair's side, pushing the gun up against his ribs as she took his arm in an apparently affectionate gesture, while her large hired muscle moved up behind them, effectively blocking the view from the rear.

With no option but to obey, Blair moved with them out of the office, leaving the goon to pull the door shut behind them. He tried desperately to act normally, terrified that some kind-hearted acquaintance might approach him, wondering if there was anything amiss should he give in to the panic that threatened to overtake him.

Emerging from the building without being accosted in any way, they crossed the parking lot, and Blair was forced to climb into the back of a white delivery van, whose advertising slogan had been deliberately obscured to avoid recognition from possible witnesses.

With Veronica sitting opposite him, still covering him with the pistol, the vehicle moved off, taking Blair to an unknown destination.

As soon as Blair was seated, Veronica fished around in her large leather purse, never taking her eyes – or the pistol – off Blair for a moment. Pulling out a pair of regulation police handcuffs, she tossed them to Blair saying, "Put those on, Mr Sandburg. And don't even try to make any stupid moves. I'm an excellent shot, and would have no problem at all incapacitating you in a most painful way. Be sensible, and this doesn't have to hurt. Not too much, anyway...!" She smiled nastily as he gulped again, eyes huge and totally convinced by her attitude and confident actions that her claims were completely accurate.

With his hands now securely cuffed in front of him, Blair managed to quell his natural desire to try to talk himself out of his predicament, realising that Ms Maynard was way too cool, collected and professional to be distracted from her purpose by his attempts at amateur psychology, or, more realistically, pure Sandburg BS.

'Oh Jim! I'm so sorry! I've managed to drop myself in the shit again, and I really, REALLY need you to come and get me!'

Although he knew his pitiful wordless pleas were hopeless, at least until Jim realised that he was late getting back to the loft, the thoughts actually settled him a little, as his inner core of stubborn fortitude hardened into a determination to keep himself alive – and more or less unharmed – until his Sentinel came to the rescue.

Because Blair firmly believed in that eventuality. He couldn't afford not to, because the alternative was unthinkable if he was to retain a remnant of self-control, or even sanity.

It seemed no time at all until the van slowed and turned into a small industrial development – if Blair had but known it – and pulled into the loading bay of one of several virtually identical

warehouse units. Once the bay's wide outer doors were securely closed behind them, the driver moved around to open the van's rear doors, nodding in understanding as Veronica indicated that he take charge of their prisoner. Seizing Blair by one arm, he yanked the young man out of the van to land unsteadily on his feet, barely giving him time to regain his balance before pulling him across the loading bay to a closed inner door.

As he was ushered through, Veronica's pistol once more prodding him in the back to hasten him on his way, Blair did his best to observe and memorise his surroundings.

Hustled along by the goon's grip on his bicep, Blair was able to catalogue the wide area, which was filled with packing cases of all shapes and sizes. Many of them bore the logo 'Swiftlee2U'; a moderately well-known delivery company which he knew the gallery used by preference, having witnessed the occasional pick up or late delivery while he was doing his modelling sessions. He and Jim had both noted the fact, but neither had had any reason to suspect that it involved anything but legitimate goods. Any paperwork Blair had chanced to glimpse had always appeared completely above board, and there had certainly been nothing furtive about the transactions, although he was now positive that the thug presently towing him along was definitely one of the more frequent delivery drivers. And Jim had never reported seeing anything untoward during his regular stakeouts at the gallery, so Blair wasn't optimistic that his lover would make the connection between his disappearance and the delivery company any time soon.

He was given little opportunity to study his surroundings more fully, however, as they reached a heavy, locked door in the opposite wall, which Veronica opened by entering a 5 digit key code into the control panel. Much to his chagrin, Blair was unable to watch the sequence since his view was deliberately blocked by her back, and he allowed himself a brief moment to ponder how much easier it would be for his Sentinel, since he was sure Jim would be able to ascertain the correct code by memorising the different tones made by each numbered button.

His thoughts returned swiftly to the present as he was shoved roughly through the open doorway, to stumble to a halt in the centre of what appeared to be nothing more than a large janitor's closet. He was about to give voice to his puzzlement, when a light came on automatically as the door was pulled shut and locked behind them, to reveal a large trapdoor, on top of which Blair was currently standing.

Quickly stepping off it in response to Veronica's impatient gesture with the pistol, Blair watched nervously as his guard lifted the heavy trapdoor to reveal a short flight of steps descending into the pitch-black darkness of a basement area below.

"Down you go, Mr Sandburg!" snapped Veronica. "Don't worry your pretty little head," she continued sarcastically at his noticeable hesitation. "We won't leave you alone in the dark – yet!"

As Blair slowly descended the staircase, a light, probably working on a motion sensor, flipped on to reveal a further storage area, with yet more packing cases, some of which were in the process of being filled. He gasped in astonishment as he registered the nature of the contents, recognising various rare and precious artefacts that were most definitely not meant for the open market. Turning back round to protest his indignation, Veronica poked him in the chest with the 9mm, sneering as she said, "Oh come now, Blair! Don't give me that offended look! You were well aware that something was going on, otherwise why were you sent in undercover to spy on us?"

"Oh, yes. I know all about your ulterior motive for taking the modelling job – and it wasn't just for the money or to get noticed by Rory! I have it on good information that you're nothing but a tame snitch, working for Cascade PD. Don't bother trying to deny it. All I want to know is just how much you've told your handlers. How deeply you've managed to incriminate me so I know how much damage control is needed.

“Obviously, I can’t let you go, but if you cooperate, I’ll make sure you don’t suffer. Because if you don’t, Bart here would enjoy loosening your tongue. What’s it to be, pretty Blair?”

The loft, early evening

Jim paced anxiously up and down, glancing at his watch for the umpteenth time. Blair should have been home at least an hour ago, knowing that Jim was cooking dinner, and Jim was certain that the young man wouldn’t pass up on the opportunity for some gentle reconnecting without calling him with his abject apologies for delaying their tryst.

Add to that the final modelling session which Blair would never intentionally duck out from and Jim was officially worried for his lover’s safety.

Finally giving in to his instincts, Jim turned off the stove, grabbed his car keys, and hurried out of the loft, intending to drive to Hargrove Hall to see exactly what was delaying his Guide. Impatiently snarling at hapless drivers who seemed intent on obstructing him unnecessarily, Jim eventually turned into the parking lot closest to Hargrove Hall, and leapt out of his jeep.

Hurrying to Blair’s small office, he noted first that, although closed, the door wasn’t actually locked. Knowing already that the room was unoccupied, he pushed his way in, and glanced around, spotting immediately Blair’s backpack still lying open on the desk, along with his cell phone. Aware that Blair would never willingly leave behind his beloved backpack and laptop, Jim growled in aggravation as he forced himself to remain calm enough to scan the room properly with his senses. Because much as his instinct was to leap into some – any - sort of action, he realised only too acutely that his Guide needed him to uncover and log every hint of available sensory evidence in order to seek out and rescue the other half of his soul.

Shortly after, Jim was once more exiting the room, this time clutching Blair’s backpack and calling Simon up on his private number.

As soon as his boss picked up the call, Jim jumped in without any pretence at nicety.

“Simon! I’m just leaving Hargrove Hall! Blair’s been snatched, no doubt about it! Can you meet me at the studio? I think he’s been made, though the gods only know how...!”

“Jim? What do you mean, Blair’s been snatched? Who...why?” his boss stuttered, momentarily taken aback at his detective’s curt declaration.

“Look, Simon, I haven’t got time to explain everything right now. I’m just about to drive to the International Gallery. Just believe me when I say that I’m sure he’s been taken, and that they have something to do with it. Please, Simon! This is for real!”

Persuaded by the pure outrage – and fear – in Jim’s tone, Simon made his decision. “OK, Jim. I believe you. But I don’t want you going into the studio before I get there, alright? I’ll grab Anderson and Ignacio as backup since they’re still in the bullpen, and meet you there a.s.a.p. But you’d better be right about this, Ellison!” he added on a threatening note. “Don’t let me be making a fool of myself here!”

The relief in Jim’s voice was evident as he replied, “Thanks, Simon! You aren’t, believe me! I’ll see you there.” He terminated the call, gunning the jeep’s engine and barrelling out of the campus, burning rubber in his haste to reach the gallery.

Shortly after, outside The International Gallery and Studio

Still sitting in the jeep, Jim was almost vibrating with impatience as he awaited the arrival of his boss and backup, although they were actually only a few minutes behind him. Jumping out of his

vehicle, he ran over to Simon's sedan as it rolled to a halt, peripherally aware that Anderson and Ignacio's unmarked unit was pulling up just behind.

"Simon! Thank you for getting here so fast! Maynard and O'Brien are still inside, and one other person – not Blair - but I haven't seen or heard anyone else. I guess since his model failed to turn up, O'Brien must have cancelled his art class?"

"Whoa there, Jim! Now, I know it's hard for you, but I need to hear everything before we go off at half-cock. I need to hear your evidence, man. We need to! Can you do that?" Jim knew exactly what his boss was asking. He was going to have to explain about the sensory evidence, and that meant coming clean in front of his colleagues. The veteran Anderson in particular would undoubtedly question his orders if told to enter the studio to arrest the occupants simply on a hunch.

And suddenly it was so simple. Jim realised that nothing was more important than his Guide's safety. If it meant coming out as a Sentinel, then so be it. He'd live with the consequences once Blair was safe. Because if he was to lose Blair, there would be no life for him to worry about anyway.

"OK. No problem, Captain. OK, guys," he continued, including Anderson and Ignacio in his speech. "This'll have to be really fast, because we don't have time for a full explanation, but suffice it to say that I am what's known as a Sentinel. My senses are enhanced to a much greater extent than normal, and Blair is my Guide – the person who helps me use them. That's why he's been riding with me for all this time. I couldn't function in the long term without him. And yes, Captain Banks and the Chief and Commissioner know about me.

"Blair didn't come home this afternoon, which is something he'd never do without letting me know, so I went to his office. And I could tell he'd been grabbed. His scent was off – overlaid with fear – and there were two others there at least..."

"Hold on, Ellison! Just a minute!" Anderson butted in, frowning in consternation. "Do you mean to say you can recognise people's individual scent? Are we talking Sci-fi here, or what?"

Jim nodded impatiently as he snapped, "Yeah, Marvin, that's exactly what I'm saying. It's not Sci-fi, and I'm not Superman. It's just something I can do – with Blair's help and support. I can hear individual heartbeats also, which is how come I know there're three people inside the studio. And Blair's heartbeat isn't one of them.

"Look, there's no time for a longer explanation. Blair is in danger. I know it! Are you in?"

Nodding briskly, Anderson made his choice. "Yeah, Jim. OK. If it's good enough for the Captain, then I guess it's good enough for me. Let's go find your partner!"

Greatly relieved, Jim smiled grimly. "Thanks, Marvin. You OK with this too, Manny?"

The younger man looked stunned, but had the presence of mind to mutter almost convincingly, "Um, sure, Jim. Fine by me!" And if his heart rate suddenly shot up, anxiety now tainting his own scent, Jim simply assumed at the time that it was a natural reaction for a rookie detective about to go into action for the first time alongside his captain and a couple of his senior colleagues.

"Right guys, let's get in there and see what Jim can come up with." Simon strode quickly over to the studio doors, hammering on them to gain admittance despite the 'closed' sign hanging there.

It was O'Brien himself who answered the door, his expression haughty as he announced, "The Gallery is closed, gentlemen! You'll have to come back tomorrow, whatever it is you want! I'm in no mood for confrontation or sales patter!" and he attempted to shut the door again in their faces.

"Not so fast, O'Brien!" snapped Simon, sticking his foot in the doorway and waving his ID in the astonished man's face. "Captain Simon Banks, Cascade PD Major Crimes Unit. And these are my

officers. We have reason to believe you are involved in the disappearance of Detective Ellison's partner, Blair Sandburg. Now, shall we take this inside?"

As they pushed their way in past the now unresisting O'Brien, the bemused man trailed after them muttering, "Blair, missing? How? Why? I mean, he didn't turn up for this evening's class, but I didn't know there was some sinister reason behind it. God! The poor, dear boy!"

Turning his attention back to his visitors, he pointed towards his office across the gallery. "Come into my office, Captain – gentlemen. I don't know how I can help you, but my partner, Veronica Maynard, is here. Not that she'll know any more than I do..." and he led the way over, his body language and scent suggesting to Jim that although plainly concerned at the news, O'Brien wasn't unduly nervous or displaying any signs of guilt.

However, as they approached the open office door, Jim instantly recognised the scent of the person within, having smelled it in Blair's office. And Blair's scent was intermingled with it also, confirming his worst suspicions.

With a growl, he pushed ahead of the others and confronted Veronica Maynard, who had risen to her feet at their entrance, a frown of irritation marring her cool beauty.

"Where is he, Maynard? What have you done with Blair?" Jim grabbed her by the upper arms as she spluttered in outrage.

Glancing over his shoulder at his colleagues, Jim snarled, "I recognise her scent, Captain! She was in Blair's office earlier! And his scent's all over her! What have you done with him, you bitch?" He shook her hard before shoving her back into her seat, knowing that if he kept his hands on her, he wouldn't be able to control his desire to tear her limb from limb.

Whatever else she might be, Veronica was no coward, and being unaware of Jim's sensory abilities, was still convinced she could get away without charge if she kept her head.

"I don't know what you're talking about! Mr Sandburg didn't show for his sitting this evening, but I have no idea why! Rory knows more about him than I do, because he's only a model after all. He's of no interest to me!"

Just then, the sound of hurrying footfalls alerted Jim to the fact that the third person in the studio was making his escape across the gallery. Sprinting out of the office and across the open floor with the speed and grace of his spirit panther, Jim tackled the man to the floor.

"You! You were in Sandburg's office earlier with Maynard!" he growled. "If you know what's good for you, you'd better start talking!" He yanked the now cuffed man to his feet, and dragged him back to the office.

"This one was there also," he snarled, barely human as the feral Sentinel surged forward. "And I can smell Blair's blood on him! Where is he?"

Bart may have been big and mean, but he recognised a cold-blooded killer when he saw one, and Ellison's steely glare and bared teeth convinced him that he was in for a world of trouble if left alone with the guy.

"You can't threaten me like that! You saw him!" he appealed to Banks. "I wasn't doing anything. That was undue force! I'm just a delivery driver...!"

"We know who you are," growled Jim, "and I don't think my Captain's going to take pity on you, you scumbag! He's as anxious to get Blair Sandburg back safe and well as I am! Now, start talking!"

As Veronica hissed in fury, Bart caved in.

"He's in the warehouse. We took him to the 'Swiftlee2U' warehouse! She made me do it, Officer! It's all her doing!"

As Rory looked on, completely flabbergasted, Simon spoke up.

"Right then. You, Anderson and Ignacio, take Ms Maynard to the PD for booking. Mr O'Brien also until we can ascertain his part in all this.

"Jim, you come with me, and bring that sack of shit with you. He can show us where Blair is. And if that boy has come to any harm," he added, right up in Bart's face, "I have no problem leaving you to Detective Ellison's tender mercies, OK?" His grin became predatory when the cringing man gulped audibly and blanched so dramatically Simon thought he might actually faint away with terror.

Same evening, in the basement of the 'Swiftlee2U' warehouse

Returning slowly to consciousness, Blair whimpered softly as the various aches and pains from his battered body began to check in. Keeping his eyes squeezed tightly shut against the throbbing in his head, he tried to breathe through the nauseous feeling threatening to overtake him.

'Oh man! So not good! Mustn't throw up; it'll hurt too much....' he thought, concentrating hard on keeping the meagre contents of his stomach where they belonged. Long minutes later, he relaxed slightly as the urge subsided, and focussed instead on cataloguing the many sources of hurt clamouring for his attention.

Starting at the top, so to speak, his head throbbed unceasingly, undoubtedly principally from the blow from Maynard's gun butt which had knocked him cold. But his face also hurt, and felt hot and swollen from Bart's unwelcome ministrations. Still keeping his eyes closed, Blair carefully ran his tongue around his teeth, grateful to feel they were all there and apparently intact, but wincing at the tender cuts on the inside of both cheeks, and tasting fresh blood which had begun to ooze again from the split in his lower lip due to the gentle exploration. His cheekbone also ached abominably, as did both eye sockets, so he was sure that his face must be a landscape of black and blue bruising, not to mention open cuts and grazes.

'Not going to be doing any modelling in a hurry,' he thought facetiously, almost giggling at the notion before a sharp stabbing pain in his side sobered him once again.

'Shit! Must have busted my ribs too! Bastard!' Blair groaned at the gradually increasing ache. 'Need to move! If I can turn on my other side, it should relieve the pressure,' his muddled brain advised him, so he tried to do just that, only to find that it was impossible. He was curled on his side in some sort of container small enough to prevent more than a miniscule amount of shifting, and his hands were cuffed in front of him again.

Eyes shooting open in panic, for a few seconds he actually believed he had gone blind. The darkness around him was absolute, and he had to fight the need to scream hysterically into the void before managing to get himself under a modicum of control. Panting shallowly in an attempt to lessen the agony from his broken ribs, he forced himself to stay relatively calm as he carefully raised his hands to explore his surroundings as much as he could.

Immediately encountering the side of the container, he felt around to see if he could locate a lid or seam he could perhaps prise open. The inside of the box seemed to be constructed from roughly finished timber, and Blair realised immediately where he was. And the knowledge nearly tipped him over the edge of hysteria again.

He had been sealed in a packing crate like the ones he had seen at the warehouse. And he knew for sure that he was never intended to be found alive.

At the same instant this terrifying thought struck him, he also realised that the air in the box seemed to be already growing thin, and he knew he couldn't afford to waste precious oxygen by screaming and crying. But the temptation to give in to his panic was almost overwhelming.

'No, idiot! Breathe, Sandburg! Nice and slow. Jim'll find you. He will! Just be alive when he gets here...'. The mental image of Jim riding to the rescue did the trick, and Blair was able to calm down enough to control his breathing, doing his best to conserve the remaining air in the box.

However, after a few minutes of lying quietly, Blair decided he had to do something more positive to save himself than passively waiting for a rescue that realistically might well come too late. Gritting his teeth against the pain from his protesting body, he raised his hands again, and felt the side of the box with his fingertips, patiently trying to find any sort of irregularity he could exploit. He soon located what felt like a slightly raised seam, so he flexed his wrist, and determinedly began to rub at the rough wood with the sharpest edge of the handcuffs that he could bring into contact with it.

While he worked, he tried not to breathe too deeply despite the added exertion, a continuous mantra running through his head. 'Jim will come! Jim will come! Jim will come....'

He had absolutely no idea how much time had passed, and was growing steadily more light-headed from the stale air when there was a slight splintering sound, and a sliver of the packing case side broke away. Almost too dizzy at first to register what had happened, Blair suddenly realised that a tiny amount of fresher air was trickling into his prison, and he eased forward enough to press his open mouth to the small gap. Almost weeping in relief, he sucked in a few lungfuls of life-giving air, then settled down with his nose close to the hole, knowing that at least he wasn't going to die from suffocation just yet.

A short while later, he felt recovered enough to work a little more on the tiny gap, and began to alternately rub at it with the handcuff again, then worry the edges with fingertips and nails that soon became sore and bleeding, but he refused to give in, and was rewarded by a little more wood breaking away.

Although he was well aware that it was highly unlikely that he could actually free himself from the improvised coffin, at least he could now breathe freely, and had a chance of staying alive until his lover tracked him down, and that comforting thought caused him to smile softly as he continued to work.

Although he had no way of knowing it, by the time Blair was forced to take a break, Jim was already on his way to the 'Swiftlee2U' warehouse. His battered body cried out for respite, while his torn fingers were too slippery with blood to grip the raw edges of the wood any longer. Giving in briefly to his exhaustion, Blair lay back as much as he could and closed his eyes for a while, promising himself that he would soon recommence his dogged attack on the packing case timber.

However, even as he tried to relax his body, his mind refused to slow down, and he reluctantly replayed the sequence of events that had brought him to this pass.

Since no vestige of light had entered the packing case when he had broken through, he surmised that he must still be either in the warehouse basement, or somewhere similar. He hoped against hope that it was the former, because it was more likely that his lover could track him here than some other location – maybe even out of state if he had been part of one of Veronica's illegal shipments. Unable to deal with the implications of such a worst-case scenario, he scolded himself for his pessimism, and concentrated instead on recalling everything he could about what had occurred earlier on. After all, if – no, when - Jim got here, he would want to learn everything Blair could tell him in order to bring Maynard and her cronies to justice.

When he had been brought down to the basement, Veronica had made it very plain that she believed him to be some sort of undercover plant – which, of course, he actually was. The problem as far as Blair was concerned was that he genuinely had no information to give her even if he wanted

to. His – and indeed, Jim’s – snooping had turned up nothing concrete to date, but he was certain that she wasn’t going to believe him. And he was going to suffer a whole lot of pain because of it.

Seeing as she had already been apprised of his subterfuge by an unknown source, he reckoned that he might as well admit to the attempt; but dreaded the consequences if she refused to accept his confession of failure.

With Veronica still covering him with the pistol, Bart pulled up a hard chair and pushed Blair down on it. Uncuffing one of his wrists, the thug dragged Blair’s arms behind him and re-secured them, this time with the chain passing between the bars at the chair’s back. Completely at their mercy, Blair bit his lip nervously as he waited for the interrogation to begin.

“Well now, Mr Sandburg. Here we are, alone at last. Now, as you can see, this basement has been specially prepared to accommodate certain precious artefacts in the safest and most protected environment possible. And that includes the area being very well sound-proofed. So you can scream all you like, darling, and no one but we two will hear you.

“So, shall we begin? Just what do you know about me?” She gazed quizzically into Blair’s terrified eyes, a small smile lifting the side of her perfectly lipsticked mouth as she invited him to confess.

“Uh, well, yeah. It’s true that I was asked to take the modelling job in an attempt to see if I could turn up anything illegal. I mean, my partner at the PD was working on the possibility that you and Rory were engaged in some sort of international smuggling gig, see? But I swear I didn’t turn up anything! In fact, after tonight I was going to hand in my notice to Rory, because we weren’t getting anywhere with that line of investigation. It’s true!” he added hastily, since he read her patent disbelief, and caught the angry look she sent to Bart.

“Please, Veronica – Ms Maynard! However much you beat me, I won’t be able to tell you anything, I swear...!” and he poured everything he could into conveying his total veracity.

But it was to no avail, because she simply nodded to Bart. “Hurt the little shit, Bart! Make him squeal!”

With an unholy smirk on his face, the big thug had advanced on Blair, his intention to intimidate the smaller man working only too well. Blair’s head rocked back as he received a stunning backhand across his mouth, followed immediately by a full-strength forehand slap against the other cheek. Balling up his fist, Bart then delivered a powerful punch to Blair’s ribs, causing the young man to hunch up in agony as the air was driven from his lungs.

However, there was no respite as Blair’s hair was caught in a cruel grip while Bart’s free hand grasped his jaw, forcing his prey to meet his sneering gaze.

“Had enough yet, little boy, or shall we continue?” he growled, plainly hoping that it wasn’t finished yet.

He wasn’t disappointed, because all Blair could do was stutter though the blood from his split lip, “N n n no, man. Please, no more! I don’t know anything, I swear! As...As far as I know, we have nothing on any of you! I I s s swear!”

And of course they chose not to believe him, so Bart did the whole routine again. And again, until Blair was too far gone to respond anymore.

Finally accepting that Blair knew nothing after all, Veronica stood; gazing speculatively down upon the bloodied and bruised figure slumped in the chair.

“Not so pretty now, eh, Blair? You should have kept well away from the police, you know, darling. You could have led such a pleasant, superficial life-style playing nice with air-headed self-proclaimed society ‘artists’, all wanting to make you their private property. Too bad you’ll never see

the light of day again," and she had casually raised the pistol and smacked it down on his unprotected skull, and the lights had gone out....

While Blair was reliving his bitter memories of his assault, Jim and Simon were cautiously approaching the warehouse, Jim using his senses to scan the immediate area and also isolate any heartbeats from within. With Simon gripping his forearm to help ground him, he smiled grimly as he reported his conclusions. "It's all clear, Simon. There's no one else around, and I can hear him! Blair's alive in there!" and both men shared a look of profound relief.

In the rear of the sedan, the cuffed and terrified Bart was almost gibbering in his efforts to cooperate and thus lessen the risk of being left alone in Jim's merciless hands.

"Th th there!" he stuttered. "Th th that's the one! I can tell you the combination for the front door, b b but I swear I never knew the code for the basement! Only Ms Maynard knew that! I was just a driver. I did what I was told..." he tailed off plaintively, desperately seeking non-existent sympathy.

Ignoring him for a moment, Simon caught and held Jim's attention even as the big detective made to exit the car, almost trembling with the need to get to his Guide.

"Hold on one moment longer, Jim, OK? You know the medics are on their way, and you've already told me Blair's is the only heartbeat you can hear. But just remember that we're still investigating a high-class smuggling racket, so I don't want you smashing the place up unnecessarily!" He was taken aback, however, at the fury in Jim's eyes as he reacted in disbelief at Banks' cautionary words.

"You've got to be kidding me, Simon! What the hell do I care about a smuggling ring when Blair's life is at stake? His safety is the only thing that matters right now!"

Realising belatedly how harsh and uncaring he had sounded, Simon backed down immediately, eyes telegraphing his apology as he replied, "Sorry, Jim. That was uncalled for, and not meant as it sounded. I don't think of Blair simply as collateral damage, man! I've grown fond of that kid even though I wanted to despise him for the nuisance I thought he was. And you're right. His safety takes precedence over a case any day.

"But it'll be better for him if we can close it down, because then his attackers will get the justice they deserve. So, let's do it!" He nodded decisively, pleased when Jim's defensive stance relaxed slightly, mollified by his friend and Captain's words.

"OK, Captain! Message received and understood. Now, let's find Blair!" Jim climbed out of the car, pulling open the rear door to grab Bart's arm.

"Come on, slimeball! Get that door open for us!" and Bart hurried to comply with his orders.

Moments later, they were crossing the open space of the main storage area, with Bart eagerly leading the way to the locked door opposite.

"That's it, sir! Ms Maynard used a 5 digit code to open it, but I don't know it..." He peered anxiously into the cops' focussed and determined faces.

Ignoring their captive, Jim met Simon's inquisitive look. "It's OK, Simon. I can do this. Blair's taught me a lot..." He dialled up his touch and hearing as he swiftly tapped each key. Concentrating hard, he isolated and memorised the individual digits by tone, and then combined and entered them in the correct sequence. As Simon – and Bart – watched in awe, within minutes the heavy door opened, and they entered the small closet space. Crossing immediately to the trapdoor, Jim yanked it open and peered down into the inky blackness below. Drawn by the siren call of the beloved

heartbeat, he swiftly descended the staircase, followed by Simon and their prisoner once the motion-activated light had switched on.

Although Simon took a moment to scan the contents of the basement, Jim moved directly to a medium-sized packing case over against the far wall. Without a pause for thought, he grabbed a crowbar lying conveniently nearby, and inserted it beneath the lid. Muscles bulging with the effort, and with Simon adding his considerable strength, the securely-fastened lid began to move. Seconds later it had been ripped free, to reveal a sight that both relieved and horrified them.

Blair was plainly and blessedly very much alive, but was in a pitiful condition. His cuffed and bleeding hands covered his sore eyes in an attempt to protect them from the sudden blaze of light, but it didn't take Sentinel sight to make out the damage wreaked on the beautiful face. The young man lay curled on his side in the enclosed space, knees pulled into his chest, and Jim could hear the minute sounds of the broken edges of ribs grating slightly, so he knew his lover must be in agony.

"Oh shit! Oh, Blair! What have they done to you?" Jim kneeled down, hands hovering just above the trembling form. He desperately wanted to take the beloved body into his arms, but was concerned that he could inflict more pain and damage by so doing.

"Jesus, Jim!" breathed Simon in shock. "Do you see his hands? And that hole in the side? Poor kid must have been working on it for hours!"

"Yeah, yeah, I saw it," murmured Jim, not taking his eyes off his Guide. "Thank the gods he had the courage, Simon!" He turned to briefly meet Simon's expression with a haunted look of his own. "Because if he hadn't, he'd have suffocated in that packing case, and I'm damned sure that was the intention!" he growled in fury.

However, this was no time to indulge in personal outrage. Blair needed him now, and his attention was immediately grabbed when the young man whimpered.

"Sssh, now baby. It's me, Jim. Simon's here too, Blair. You're safe now. Just stay still a little while longer, sweetheart, until the medics get here. I don't want to hurt you any more by pulling you out. Can you do that for me?"

"J J Jim? Oh, gods! You, you f f found me!" Blair carefully lowered his hands from wet eyes which revealed barely a sliver of blue from between the horribly swollen lids. "Everything hurts, Jim," he whispered plaintively. "P P please, man, get me out!"

"Just a few moments more, babe. The medics are here. Simon's bringing them down now. They'll check you over and I'm sure they'll give you something for the pain as soon as they can, sweetheart. I know it's hard..." Jim frowned in sympathy as his Guide moaned again despite his best efforts to affect a courageous and stoic front. Covering Blair's bloodied fingers with his own warm hands; Jim sent all his love and care through their shared link, relieved when Blair relaxed minutely beneath his touch. His heart swelled almost to bursting when Blair's battered lips twitched in the tiniest of grins.

"Um, Jim, man! I need to pee real bad. Can you tell the medics to get a move on?" And as they shared a moment of wry humour, Jim knew that Blair was going to be alright.

Part 7: Picture of Guilt

Late that night, Cascade General Hospital

Jim rubbed a hand over his beard-stubbed face, trying to fend off the exhaustion that threatened to overtake him. He had been sitting by Blair's hospital bed for several hours now, and his body was complaining mightily from being squashed into the hard plastic visitors' chair, but there

was nowhere else he would rather be. To see his beloved Guide sleeping quietly, battered but safe, was all that mattered to Jim; and he thanked whatever power had heeded his frantic prayers for giving Blair the courage to fight for survival.

However, despite his intense gratitude for his lover's life, he was still deeply angered and dismayed by Blair's condition, the Sentinel within wanting nothing more than to tear his attackers apart without mercy. Because they had shown none to his Guide. He shuddered again at the knowledge that Blair would have died in that airtight packing case if he hadn't had the courage and strength of character to create that tiny but vital hole which had allowed just enough fresh air in to ensure Blair's survival.

And what was even more important to Jim was that he was well aware that Blair's determination to live was fuelled to a great extent by his need to stay with Jim, and the thought was humbling to say the least.

Leaning over the sleeping form, Jim carefully smoothed a stray curl away from the broad brow, frowning once more at the damage to his lover's face. Blair would recover. He knew that, because the doctor had explained in detail what the young man's injuries entailed, and was quick to reassure Jim that although his partner's face looked a mess now, the underlying bone structure hadn't been permanently damaged and the soft tissue should heal well enough given time.

But right now, there seemed to be barely an inch of unmarred skin to be seen. Both eyes were swollen and blackened, and although some of the more superficial cuts were covered by butterfly bandages, deeper ones over his left cheekbone and eyebrow had required stitches, as had the split in his lower lip, and one inside his cheek where his teeth had gashed it. For the rest, much of the soft tissue was scraped and bruised, and would undoubtedly remain colourful for a long time while the bruising healed.

On the plus side, his cheekbone hadn't been cracked, as the doctor had first suspected, and a CAT scan had revealed that the blow from Veronica's gun butt had also failed to fracture his skull. However, he had suffered a serious enough concussion to be admitted for observation, and would likely be here for a couple of days at least.

And Jim was also aware of the damage Blair's body had sustained, presently hidden by a light sheet and blanket. Blair's torso was black and blue from Bart's punches, and three of his ribs had been cracked. Although not broken badly enough to cause internal damage, moving would be painful for weeks to come. It was also going to be painful for Blair to do anything for himself for a while, because he had made a mess of his fingertips and nails while attacking the side of the packing case, such that both hands now lay on top of the bedcovers wrapped in enough gauze to resemble boxing gloves.

And despite everything, Blair was still the most beautiful sight Jim could ever wish to see.

Just then, the door opened slightly, and Jim looked up to see Simon's face peer around the edge, checking out the situation within.

"Hey, Simon! Come on in. Blair's sleeping," Jim added rather unnecessarily. "It's good of you to call by."

Slipping quietly into the room, Simon looked down at the silent figure for a moment, a frown between his brows.

"Well, I had to make sure you hadn't done any serious damage to hospital personnel and property," he chuckled, referring to Jim's frantic behaviour on arrival at the ER. He had hovered protectively over Blair all the way to the hospital, and refused to leave his side while his Guide was triaged. However, when Blair had been whisked away to X-ray, Simon had been forced to physically restrain the distraught Sentinel, threatening him with arrest if he didn't settle down.

Smiling ruefully at the recollection, Jim replied, "Yeah, well. Sorry about that, Captain. I was just so worried, you know? He looked so bad, and then he passed out..."

Squeezing his friend's shoulder, Simon murmured gently, "I know, Jim. I understand. Hell, if Blair was my partner, I guess I'd feel the same way. That kid certainly has a way about him. Makes me want to protect him even when he's driving me crazy with his constant chatter. He's a good man, and he didn't deserve this."

"Thanks, Simon. It's good of you to say. And no, he didn't deserve this. And it's all because of me..." he tailed off, guilt suffusing his expression.

"No, Jim. None of that!" responded Simon, still quietly, but forcefully. "Blair's his own man, and he knows his own mind, even if he comes over as a flake at times. He chose to stay with you. You didn't force him to. And he could have refused this undercover role at any time. I wouldn't have blamed him if he had, once I heard what he'd been through before. He's got guts, for sure."

"You're right about that, Simon. But I'm not so sure about not forcing him to stay with me. I think that, once bonded, Sentinel and Guide have no choice about it. And I feel bad about that. I'm sure he didn't expect to sign up for the long haul when he first agreed to start helping me."

"But do you know what he said to me in the ambulance? He said he couldn't just let himself die without a fight because he didn't want to leave me alone and unguided. How amazing is that?" His face crumpled a little as he tried to contain his emotions.

Nodding in complete understanding, Simon murmured, "It's true you're one lucky SOB, Jim. But so is he. He loves you with everything he has, and you love him back. You both deserve each other, and that's the truth. Don't feel guilty because you've found the other half of your soul, man. After everything that's happened recently, I'm finally beginning to understand the real depth of this Sentinel and Guide thing, and I almost envy you."

Offering his friend a somewhat watery smile, Jim said, "Thanks for that, Simon. It means a lot to me that you've been so supportive of us. And I know Blair would say so also. And it'll be even more important to us now because I've decided to come out as a Sentinel."

At Simon's shocked and concerned expression, he continued, "I know I've been trying to keep everything hidden, because frankly I don't like the idea of being seen as some sort of freak. Even though Blair keeps assuring me that I'm nothing of the sort," and he smiled softly at his lover.

"But after this case, and particularly because of the mess with the porn pictures, I feel it's only right that folks at the PD understand what Blair really means to me. How important a role he plays in supporting me. If I'd been open from the outset, there would have been no need for such jealousy and bigotry, and Blair wouldn't have suffered like he did – and still does.

"And I intend to use my senses to find out exactly which bastard set him up," he added darkly. "And when I find him – or her – they're going to see for themselves just what a Sentinel is capable of!"

"OK, Jim, I hear you. But don't do anything just yet, OK? I do understand, and I'll back you up any way I can, but let yourself cool off a little before you rush into something on impulse. And Blair will need to be consulted also, won't he? So wait until he's well enough to speak for himself, then we'll do what needs to be done.

"But for the record, I think you're making the right decision. And I'll help you – help you both – to live with the results."

Offering Simon a grateful smile, Jim was about to reply when a soft moan immediately distracted him. Blair was finally waking up, and both men turned their attention to the small, vulnerable-looking figure in the bed.

"Jmmmmm..."

Gently grasping Blair's bandaged hand in his, Jim leaned forward eagerly. "Yeah, baby, it's me. How're you doing, sweetheart?" And he was completely unconcerned at Simon hearing the endearments. No way was he going to suppress his feelings again as far as his lover was concerned.

"D'you...g't n'mbr?"

"What's that, lover? Get number?" replied Jim, frowning in puzzlement at the glimpse of blue eyes seeking him out from behind the swollen lids.

"Truck't hit me..." Blair whispered, a tiny twitch of amusement pulling at the corner of his painfully puffy lips.

Jim burst into genuine laughter, leaning down to plant a soft kiss on a relatively unmarked portion of Blair's wide brow, before saying, "Only you, Chief! Don't ever change, baby. I love you. So much...!"

Although grinning with heart-felt relief at this evidence of Blair's indomitable spirit, Simon found himself having to look away from the scene before him, an unaccustomed moisture in his eyes. Profoundly grateful that Blair was going to be OK, and therefore Jim would be also, he vowed to do his utmost to protect this unconventional pair who had become so precious to him.

Knowing his presence was surplus to requirements as Jim and Blair reconnected, totally wrapped up in one another and oblivious to their surroundings, Simon smiled gently and quietly left the room, already planning on how best to help Sentinel and Guide to come out.

Two days later, the loft

Powerful arm wrapped around Blair's waist for support, Jim gently walked his Guide over to the sofa, where he eased him down into the soft cushions.

"Thanks, man," Blair whispered, trying to grin up into his lover's worried face. "Didn't expect to feel quite so wimpish. I didn't feel so bad when we left the hospital."

"Cut yourself some slack, baby. I still think you should have had an extra day to recover, even though it's great to have you back. You're going to be pretty much immobile for a while with those ribs and deep bruising, and you still look very colourful, I have to say." Jim smiled fondly down into his Guide's upturned face.

In truth, Blair still looked terrible, although a lot of the swelling in his face had gone down, and his eyelids weren't as puffy. However, the bruising was even more spectacular as the underlying damage healed, and the stitches reminded Jim a little of Frankenstein's monster. Blair would have some scarring, but the surgeon had been careful, so it should fade quite quickly to all but sentinel sight, and for that Jim was very grateful.

On the other hand, the cracked ribs made any sort of movement a trial for Blair, and even attempting to sleep caused him pain if he should try to change his position, but Jim had a remedy for that problem. Now Blair was back at home where he belonged, Jim intended to make certain he was cradled carefully in his Sentinel's arms at night, so that even when restless, he wouldn't be allowed to strain himself.

And Jim had absolutely no problem with helping Blair with more personal activities, even though he knew the younger man was embarrassed by his helplessness. As far as Jim was concerned, nothing he had to do for Blair was too much or gross, and he made a point of telling his Guide so as often as he could. It wouldn't be for much longer after all as Blair's hands were healing much quicker than Jim would have thought having seen them when Blair was first discovered.

However, a persistent headache remained severe enough for Blair to swallow his pain meds without complaint, and his current pallor and the sweat beading his brow bore witness to the level of discomfort he was suffering, so that Jim contemplated him for a moment before saying, "You want to stay down here on the sofa for a while, or shall I help you into bed? I can get some extra pillows and a comforter if you want to lie here for a bit."

Smiling carefully, so as not to pull the stitches in his lip, Blair answered, "I'd like to stay down here with you for a while, lover, but I wouldn't say no to some extra pillows!"

"Your wish is my command, baby!" and Jim ran upstairs to grab the items, then tucked them under his Guide's head and around his body, bundling him in the warm layers and ensuring he was in the most comfortable position, more or less reclining with his feet up, presently resting on Jim's lap.

"You're so good to me," Blair murmured, a hint of a catch in his voice. "How'd I get so lucky, man?"

"Hey, none of that, baby," responded Jim, gently wiping away the single tear that tracked down Blair's bruised cheek. "I'm the lucky one, Blair. Without you, I'd have gone mad or topped myself by now. I can never thank you enough for finding me – and bonding with me."

"Then we're both lucky," his lover replied. "And both mushy as hell!" he added cheekily, trying to lighten the mood.

Getting with the programme, Jim grinned as he said, "You got that right, sweetheart! Now, what do you fancy for dinner....?"

Following morning, the loft

"Are you sure you'll be OK alone, sweetheart? I won't go in to the office today if you have any doubts at all. Just say the word..."

"Jim, Jim! I'm certain, OK? I'm warm and comfortable here on the sofa, I've got my meds and juice at hand, and I can just about manage to turn the pages of my new Anthro journal. I'll be fine, honestly!"

"But thank you for caring anyway. And more to the point, take care yourself, lover," Blair continued, his exasperated expression swiftly changing to one of concern.

"If Marvin and Manny have been spreading the word about your senses, there might be some backlash – some nastiness. I should be with you..."

"No, baby, not yet. If they've been yakking to all and sundry despite Simon's warning, it's no more than we've been expecting for a while. It was only a matter of time before folks started to put two and two together, and I guess I'm just surprised it's taken this long to come to a head. I still want to go ahead with the revelation anyway, but in our own time and in our own way, and I'll just tell any persistently nosy bastards that they'll have to wait until we do it officially. Today's visit is really just to catch up on progress with the Maynard case, and find out from Simon when it's most convenient for us to go in and do the deed. Which won't be until you're well enough anyway, lover."

"Well, I guess it gives us a bit more time to iron out the details of exactly how much we're going to reveal," Blair mused, still looking concerned.

"Anyway, go, man! The sooner you go, the sooner you can get back to me. But I want a kiss first..." he added, a faint note of pleading entering his tone.

"You got it, sweetheart!" Jim enveloped him in a gentle but thorough embrace, taking the lush lips with exquisite care so as not to hurt the healing cut. Pulling away, he ran sentinel-sensitive

fingers over Blair's features as he smiled softly. "See you shortly, baby!" and he laughed delightedly at the expected response as Blair fired back, "Don't call me shortly...!"

He was still chuckling as he patted his Guide's curly head, and turned to leave the loft.

Later, in the MCU bullpen

Although Jim had arrived in the bullpen several minutes ago, he had yet to make it over to his desk as he had been accosted by several of his colleagues, all wanting to know how Blair was doing. If the young man should ever wonder about his popularity, at least amongst the people that mattered to him, he would have been both surprised and pleased by the response.

As H wandered in after Jim, he had immediately called out "Hey Jimbo! Good to see you, my man, but how's Hairboy? He doing OK, man? Is he up to having visitors yet?"

"He's not too bad, H, but he'll probably need a few more days until he's ready to see people. But I know he'll be really pleased to hear all the messages of goodwill I've been told to pass on. Rhonda's even said that I have to give him a big kiss from her!"

"But what's with the 'Hairboy' thing?"

H chuckled affably. "Well, all those curls, man! Just seemed to fit, ya know? Anyhow, give him my best, and tell him to get his ass in here as soon as possible. You're much nicer to know when he's here to run interference for you!" And he continued to his desk with a friendly backward wave as Jim responded dryly, "Gee, thanks, H! Love you too!"

He was still smiling when Simon's face appeared around his office door. "'Bout time you made it in, Ellison! My office, now!"

When Jim entered the office, he saw that Captain Sullivan from Vice was there, sitting comfortably and nursing a cup of Simon's gourmet coffee.

"Hey, Jim! Good to see you again. Just dropped by to offer my support to Simon and to you and Blair about the Sentinel thing. How's the kid doing? I heard about his injuries."

"He's doing better, Mike, thanks for asking, although he looks more like a Picasso than a Rembrandt right now. Poor kid's got more colours on his face than any artist's palette! But he'll be OK. And thanks for offering your support also. It means a lot that you'll be there for us when we're ready for the official 'Sentinel and Guide Coming Out Party'." He grimaced sourly at his own words.

"No problem, Jim. Just wanted to say that I think it's about time, to be honest. I know that plenty of the detectives in Vice and Major Crimes already think you've got some sort of edge. Either that or you're one lucky SOB. And it'll be better for Blair once folks realise the main reason for him being here, and not just gathering material for his PhD.

"I don't think you'll have much problem with the DA's office either, come to think of it. After all, Blair's always contended that your abilities are completely natural and normal for you, so it's not as if they're dealing with artificially-enhanced – or obtained - evidence. Just have to expand their parameters a bit where you're concerned." He grinned cheerfully at both Simon and Jim. "Give 'em a bit of a dog and pony show and they'll be eating out of your hand! Anyhow, I'll be on my way. Give my regards to Sandburg!" He rose to his feet before shaking hands with both men, and seeing himself out.

Once Mike was on his way, Simon indicated the chair he'd just vacated. "Take a load off, Jim. Coffee?" At Jim's affirmative nod, he prepared a mug and freshened his own.

"I guess Blair must be better – or at least well enough to leave alone for a few hours," he said with a grin. "Either that, or he's had enough of the uber-protective Mother Hen routine, huh?" and he chuckled at Jim's pained expression.

"Hey, I'm not that bad, Captain! Um, well, maybe I am," confessed Jim with a self-deprecating smirk. "But you're right. He is much better, although his face really is still a mess, and his ribs trouble him. Not to mention the strained muscles, sore hands and headaches, but those are improving, according to Blair. And when I start listing his injuries like that, I realise just how lucky he is to be alive." His face fell again at the thought.

"It's OK, Jim. I understand, and I didn't mean to upset you. But the important thing is that he is alive, and he will get better, so let's dwell on the positive, OK?"

Smiling again, Jim replied, "Yeah, Simon, you're right. And I should be thanking my lucky stars, not getting morbid.

"Anyhow, you said you'd fill me in on the Maynard bitch's case. How's it going?" and for the next few minutes, he concentrated on listening while Simon explained the situation so far.

Frowning disgustedly, Simon rested his chin on his hands as he leant forward, elbows on his desk. "Well, to be honest, Jim, there hasn't been much more progress from what I told you when I phoned yesterday, but that's not saying that we're getting nowhere. And yes, I know you wanted in on the questioning, but I have to say that in a way I'm glad you weren't. Blair needed you close, and I for one wasn't at all sure you wouldn't rip Maynard and Bart's heads off. I've got to say, Jim, that I don't think I've ever seen you so – well - feral I think I'd call it! Sure scared the hell out of me!

"Anyway, it obviously scared the hell out of Bart also, because when I threatened him with a private session with you, he couldn't talk fast enough!

"Upshot is that he's confessed to being in Maynard's pay more or less from when the gallery opened. There's one other delivery driver he's fingered also, but I think he's telling the truth when he says that the parent company didn't have a clue about the smuggling sideline going on under their noses. When I called the company's owner and manager, Len Majors, he couldn't have been more embarrassed. Seemed genuinely upset about Blair getting beaten and stashed on his premises also.

"Anyhow, Bart'll be charged with aggravated assault on top of everything else, so he's got to be looking at some serious jail time.

"On the other hand, Maynard hasn't said a word. Not even taking the advice of her high-priced attorney. Between you and me, I think she's worried about repercussions if she fingers anyone else in her network, because it's pretty plain that she must have plenty of influential contacts at home and abroad. And I'm sure they could get to her easily enough if they had reason.

"It's ironic that we didn't actually have anything on her before she attacked Blair, but the fact that she did attack him, circumstantial and forensic evidence thrown up since, and Bart's confession means that I don't think there's any chance of her walking. O'Brien's pretty much washed his hands of her also. By the time we let him go, he was about as distraught and devastated as any poor dupe I've ever seen. Almost had me feeling sorry for him, I've got to admit. I'm 99.9% certain he's completely innocent of any wrong-doing, and he was really upset on Blair's behalf too. Undercover snoop or no, O'Brien really liked the kid."

However, his face took on a more serious expression as he continued, "But there's one more thing, which you're not going to like, Jim. She may not have admitted it, but according to Bart, Maynard was tipped off about Blair. And he's convinced that the call came from someone inside the PD."

Leaning back in his seat, he regarded Jim with concern as he waited rather anxiously for Jim's response.

He was both surprised and relieved at his friend's lack of reaction, but worried also, because he had fully expected Mt Ellison to erupt at the news. Instead, Jim simply looked resigned and dismayed, plainly deeply hurt, but almost as if he had expected as much.

"You know, Simon, I've got to be honest," he replied at length with a deep sigh. "I think I knew what you were going to say before you said it. I honestly believe that it's the only explanation for her otherwise unprovoked attack on Blair.

"Someone has still got it in for Blair – and me also, I suspect – and I'm sure that same someone was the bastard that circulated the porn pictures. But I just don't know why? Sure, there's always been some jealousy, and some real bigotry out there. We both know that. But this goes deeper. Someone has more than a general, quasi-political statement to make. This smacks of a real personal grudge against Blair.

"And I have to say, I have absolutely no idea who it could be." He looked away for a moment, jaw muscles jumping as he clenched his teeth in frustration, expression drawn as he digested Simon's information.

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and Marvin Anderson entered, a concerned expression on his weathered face as he glanced from one to the other.

"Sorry to butt in on you, Captain – Jim – but I'm worried about Manny. Kid said he had some errands to run, but that he wouldn't be more than an hour or so. I mean, he knew we had an appointment at the DA's office later this morning, but he still hasn't come back. And he's turned his cell phone off also.

"Either that, or something's very wrong...."

Suddenly, Jim sat up straighter, and locked gazes with Simon.

"Blair's in trouble!" he growled urgently. "Don't ask how I know, but its true! And I think Manny's got something to do with it!"

Meanwhile, at the loft

Still lying cosily tucked up in a cocoon of blankets on the sofa, Blair woke up from a deep sleep feeling decidedly twitchy. Something was off, and he forced heavy-lidded eyes to open, frowning as he blinked rapidly to get focussed properly.

And yelped in shock to see Manny Ignacio sitting on the coffee table in front of him, staring at him cold-eyed and with his service weapon drawn and resting on his knee.

Stuttering in confusion, Blair stammered, "MM Manny? Wh what're you doing here? What's wrong? Wh...where's Jim?"

The young detective tilted his head slightly as he regarded Blair as if he were some sort of exotic bug, and Blair got the fanciful notion that Ignacio was debating whether to stomp on said bug or add it to his collection. Impaled on a pin....

Unable to contain his anxiety, he couldn't stop himself talking even though it was highly unlikely to deter his visitor from doing whatever it was he had in mind.

"How...how did you get in? I didn't hear you. Did Jim give you a key? Please, man! Talk to me! Has Jim been hurt?"

Manny sneered at the babbling grad student, and shook his head slowly as he leaned forward a little, deliberately intimidating his prey as he fixed Blair with a baleful glare.

"You never shut up, do you, Sandburg? How the hell does Ellison put up with you day in and day out? And Banks also! You must drive the guy demented! But now I know why you've managed to worm your way so deep into the PD. So deep that even seeing what a perverted slut they've been harbouring in their midst, they couldn't throw you out on your ear like you deserve. Not without risking damage to their pet 'Sentinel!'" and his sneer hardened as his eyes grew colder still.

"But in answer to your question, Super Genius, it was easy to pick the lock on your front door. Especially since you hadn't chained it or bolted it from the inside. Pretty dumb for a brainy guy like you, huh?"

Blair was unhappily aware that he hadn't even bothered to try, certain that he was safe in his own home, and hadn't been sure whether his bandaged and sore fingers would have been up to the job anyway.

Then his straying attention snapped back to Ignacio as the man continued, plainly quite content to explain in detail why he was here.

"And yeah, Jim's just fine – for now – although I guess he won't be too happy when you're gone. But he'll get over it. And be better for it, without a fag Jew-boy hanging on to his shirt tails.

"But would you like to know why I really hate you so much, Sandburg? Why you deserved to be shamed? And why you deserve to die?" and Blair's voice dried in his throat as he stared wide-eyed at his tormentor, certain that Manny had slipped beyond the borders of sanity.

Grinning maniacally now, Manny leaned forward even more, so that Blair could feel the heat of his breath in his face.

"I'm going to tell you a story, pretty Blair. A story about a young woman called Maria, who worked for Stan Bartlett at The Goldmine Studio. Ring any bells, you little shit?"

"Maria? Maria Ignacio. Oh my god, of course!" Blair murmured, almost sub-vocally. Then, a little louder, "She's your sister? But I don't understand! What did I do to hurt her?" And Manny laughed out loud at the kid's naivety before his face settled into a furious scowl.

"What did you do?" he grated incredulously, then continued menacingly, voice cold and hard as he drove his point home. "Maria was happy at the Goldmine! She was popular – a regular star! And then you came along and screwed everything up! Stan gets arrested – hell, gets gutted in prison – and all his hard work is destroyed! And his loyal staff either has to run for it or get arrested too! And it's all your fault! Maria's in Tacoma, trying to get her life back, and you're cosyng up to the most successful detective in Cascade PD! And you're not even a cop!! You're just a slut, no more and no less. And now you're about to get just what you deserve..." and he grabbed a pillow from the couch, intending to press it over Blair's face.

As Blair tried vainly to ward off the attack, batting uselessly at the descending pillow with his bandaged hands, the door burst open to reveal an enraged Jim, gun drawn, with Simon and Marvin Anderson close behind.

"Back off, Ignacio," the Sentinel growled, teeth bared in a feral snarl. "Do it, you fucker, or I'll blow your brains out. And I'd prefer not to have to clean your mess up off my hardwood floor..."

Manny frowned at the interruption, and hesitated just long enough for Jim to snap off a quick shot, hitting the younger man high in the shoulder and driving him backwards, away from his Guide.

As Simon and Marvin rushed forwards to take Ignacio into custody, Jim holstered his weapon and reached for his Guide, who was gasping for breath, wide-eyed in terror but very much alive.

Cuddling the trembling body to him, he murmured soothing nonsense until Blair had pulled himself together somewhat. Meanwhile, Simon yanked Ignacio to his feet and thrust him into the hands of the uniforms who had arrived as backup, ordering them to get his wound treated before taking him downtown for booking. As he was dragged past the pair on the sofa, Jim looked up briefly to meet the young detective's intransigent glare.

"Count yourself lucky, punk! If I hadn't been concerned for my floors, I'd have taken the head shot!"

Epilogue: The loft, six months later

Hands waving in his customary enthusiasm and punctuating his words with expressive gestures, Blair bounced into the loft, turning to walk backwards as he grinned up at Jim.

"See, man, it's like Eli said. The mortuary rituals of prehistoric societies have so much to tell us about...Oops!" and he giggled suddenly as his back collided with the support pillar near the kitchen.

"Hmmm, yeah...!" murmured Jim, assuming an expression of avid concentration which was betrayed by the grin threatening to break free. "I can see how walking backwards could lead to mortuary ritual if it took place at, say, the edge of the Grand Canyon...?"

Howling with laughter, Blair bounced forward again, and wrapped his arms around Jim's waist, subjecting him to a whole-hearted 'Blair-hug.'

"Oh, man! Love your sense of humour, O Sentinel mine, even if it's at my expense! Hey, you still want me to do lasagne tonight?"

Hugging his lover back, and grinning affectionately at the young man's rapid-fire change of subject, Jim responded, his loving tone belying his words. "Slow down, Darwin! You're confusing me with too much information at once! Take pity on us lesser mortals with less-than-genius-level IQs!

"And yes, I'd kill for your lasagne, baby..." and he silenced Blair's attempted response by claiming the beautiful mouth in a deep and loving kiss.

Some minutes later, a rosy-cheeked and very aroused Guide licked his well-used lips as he peeked slyly up at his lover from beneath his thick lashes.

"Hmmm-mmmm! Wow! Perhaps we'd better pull back a little if you want feeding, lover? 'Cause I have to say my appetite for lasagne just got shoved aside by a whole 'nother taste altogether!"

Cupping the flushed cheeks in his palms, Jim raised the beloved face up to meet his hot gaze as he murmured, "You little imp! You know damned well which I'd go for now, but we do need to eat, baby. Boring as it may be, you haven't had anything since breakfast, and you've been on the go all day. And you're going to need all your energy for later, I promise, my Pretty!" he added, eyes twinkling now as he twirled an imaginary moustache.

"But since we have to eat, then I'd really like it to be your lasagne....!" and he offered Blair his most beseeching look.

Shaking his head in amused resignation, Blair chuckled as he slanted a cheeky glance up at Jim.

"OK, OK! You win, lover! One lasagne à la Sandburg coming up! But I expect payment in full later, Dick Dastardly.....!" and Blair turned away and sashayed provocatively towards the kitchen.

"Oh, yeah!" muttered his Sentinel, already licking his lips in anticipation and eyes locked greedily on his Guide's departing – and totally delectable - butt. "You'd better believe it, baby! Bring it on, Penelope Pitstop...!"



Much later, Jim lay relaxed and spent, calmly and contentedly gazing down at the sated, sleeping bundle of well-loved Guide cuddled close, arm and leg thrown possessively across Jim's body and curly head resting on his chest, tucked into his shoulder.

Bathed in the moonlight streaming through the skylight, Blair looked almost ethereal, skin porcelain-clear beneath its dusting of fine dark hair, the contrast making him all the more enticing to his besotted Sentinel.

Yet Jim could still easily make out the silvering scars on the beautiful face, even if they were barely visible to normal eyes now, and his own brows drew together as he instinctively performed his customary scan of his lover's slumbering body.

All in all, Blair had healed well from the various injuries from the attack, and was pretty much back to full health and vigour now. Although scabbed and colourful for some weeks, his face had now regained most of its former loveliness, although the scars from the worst of the cuts had taken quite a bit longer to fade and would always be visible to sentinel sight. Blair realised this, and had apologised profusely as if it was somehow his fault, and it had taken all Jim's powers of persuasion to convince the younger man that he was still as desirable as ever to Jim.

Blair's hands had healed remarkably quickly to his intense relief, so that he had been able to start taking care of personal needs within a matter of days. Nevertheless, he was immensely grateful to Jim for help with bathing and washing his hair – something his Sentinel had always loved doing anyway, and the shared experience was invariably satisfying for them both. However, the new skin on his fingertips was still very sensitive on occasion, and Blair fancied that it gave him just a faint taste of what it must be like to have the gift of sentinel-sensitive touch.

On the other hand, the residual pain from his ribs and torso seemed to linger interminably for the impatient young man, so that Blair was forced to refrain from too much activity for quite some while, to his intense frustration. Unable to move quickly, or lift anything but light objects without real discomfort, he had worried incessantly that he was becoming too much of a burden to Jim. But the remembrance of Blair's fears actually brought a smug smile to Jim's face as he recalled how he had set his lover's mind at rest.

Every time Blair's despondency and anxiety kicked in, Jim had simply taken his Guide to bed, where he made exquisitely gentle but passionate love to him, reassuring him through their bond that all was well, and that Jim would never abandon him under any circumstances. After all, it was no more than he had done immediately after Ignacio's attack, needing to comfort his distraught lover, threatened and hurt undeservedly twice in just a few days...

Thoughts changing direction somewhat, Jim pondered Manny's attack, and the repercussions it had had for his already injured partner.

Thoroughly terrorised by Ignacio's dark threats and insinuations, Blair had thankfully escaped much further injury, although the struggle with the pillow had strained already sore muscles and aggravated raw fingertips. On the other hand, his already shaken self-confidence had taken another heavy blow, and he had jumped at shadows for weeks, only relaxing fully when in Jim's arms.

As for Manny, he had been taken for treatment for the shoulder wound, then, accompanied by Marvin Anderson and the uniformed officers had been driven downtown for booking. Anderson, already upset that his rookie partner had attacked the wounded observer in his own home, was further shaken by the revelation that Ignacio was the source of the attempt to discredit Sandburg. Furiously angry at his plans being thwarted so completely, Manny had been unable to hold his tongue, and had continued to rant throughout the journey, and during booking.

Under questioning, he vehemently defended his actions, having convinced himself that he was doing it for Maria, and also for the good of the PD, Jim Ellison in particular. As far as he was concerned, his own exposure to Ellison's 'Sentinel' abilities was proof positive that it was even more imperative that the pathetic little Jew-boy fag be disposed of, so that Jim could be partnered by a proper 'Guide.' And as if further evidence were needed that he had started the smear campaign, a thorough search of his apartment turned up the flash drive containing the pornographic manipulations, taped to the underside of his sock drawer.

Plainly seriously disturbed, although charged with assault and attempted murder, he was scheduled for psychiatric evaluation before sentencing, since he obviously needed long-term therapy.

Yet despite everything, and to Jim's intense aggravation, Blair was still loath to press charges. In the face of Manny's apparent insanity, and the fact that Blair felt a totally undeserved sense of guilt regarding Maria, the soft-hearted grad student wanted to forgive, not punish his attacker.

However, he realised that Manny was delusional, and a danger to himself as well as others, so he pushed for the option of Ignacio being committed to Conover Psychiatric Hospital rather than some prison psych ward in the hope that some way down the line the young man could one day be released, cured and able to take his place in society once again.

Peering down once again at the peaceful, sleeping face, Jim smiled slightly in fond exasperation. Who else but Blair would feel guilty for what happened to Maria Ignacio, and who but his Guide would want to forgive her murdering bastard of a brother? But he supposed he should expect nothing more. His big heart and his empathy was what made Blair such a wonderful partner and Guide, and for that Jim was heartily grateful.

As sleep still eluded him for the moment, Jim settled back comfortably into his pillows, and let his thoughts turn toward the topic of the whole 'Sentinel / Guide' issue, and what it meant to him and Blair now.

A sardonic grin twitching at his lips, Jim calmly analysed the whole 'coming out' decision. Despite his worst fears, the event had turned out to be far more straight-forward and easily

acceptable than he could ever have imagined. Acting on the assumption that whispered rumours and half-truths were potentially far more damaging than the real thing, Blair had convinced him that injured or not, they should come forward as a bonded pair as soon as possible and face the music once and for all. And Jim couldn't find fault with his young Guide's logic.

Within days, Simon had arranged a meeting at the loft with himself, the Chief of Police and the Commissioner, plus the DA in attendance, all focussed on how to reveal the truth about Jim as a Sentinel within the PD without compromising his safety in the field any more than necessary.

Before their arrival, Jim and Blair had already discussed how much they wanted to reveal. Blair had insisted that they should not disclose the full range of Jim's senses, but agreed that they would have to stress the possibility of zoning, simply to safeguard Jim and justify Blair's presence as his Guide.

Once their audience had arrived, the pair gave some demonstrations of Jim's capabilities; enough to impress the DA, who hadn't witnessed them before, and to consolidate their claims in the eyes of the Chief and Commissioner.

Added to the practical demonstration, Blair had handed out modified versions of his notes, painstakingly compiled during his time with Jim, and had happily discussed topics arising from them.

At that point, Simon had laughingly suggested that 'Sentinel Studies' ought to be the topic for Blair's doctoral dissertation. However, blushing furiously, Blair had demurred.

"No, Captain. Tempting though it is, I can't broadcast Jim's abilities far and wide, just in case there are criminal elements who think they can use the information against him. This is why we don't want the whole announcement to be made public.

"I do intend to continue adding to and writing up my study notes – perhaps in the form of a self-help manual for the benefit of others who think they may have similar difficulties – but otherwise I'm happy to keep on with my 'Closed Societies' topic. After all, it is the stated reason for my extended pass...!" They had all shared a companionable laugh at his words.

Regarding the actual revelation, all had agreed that a small, private meeting would be held within the PD, the audience to include Department Heads and Senior Administrators only. The intention was that an abridged version of Jim's abilities would be disclosed, backed up by suitable demonstrations, during which Blair would stress the Sentinel's usefulness within the department while down-playing any suggestion that Jim was some sort of 'Superman'. Once over, the Chief and Commissioner had calmly instructed their audience to disseminate the news amongst their own people as prosaically as possible, emphasising the fact that it should simply be regarded as an 'open secret' within the PD, of interest to no-one else but their own, and definitely not to be shared indiscriminately with members of the press or the public.

In the aftermath of the announcement, many had approached Jim admitting their suspicions regarding his incredible success rate in the field, but generally glad that he had finally felt comfortable with coming forward, especially where Blair was concerned. Knowing now exactly why the young man's presence was so important, the majority of PD personnel had let go of their discontent, and had accepted Blair, if not with open arms, then at least with a modicum of tolerance.

And as Blair often repeated, they had always told the truth, if not the whole truth. He really was collecting material for his dissertation, and his extended sick leave had given him the opportunity to get on and finish it.

However, at this thought, Jim's brows drew together in a frown of annoyance. Because therein lay the most unpleasant and unacceptable aspect of their progress during the last few months.

At Rainier University, Chancellor Edwards had always made it clear that she had zero tolerance for Blair, though for what reason, no-one actually had any idea. Suffice it to say that she had long harboured the hope that he would overstep the mark once too often, thus giving her the opportunity to dismiss him without any repercussions.

She had hoped to carry out her plan after the Bartlett case when Sandburg had been implicated in some disgusting pornographic material, but had been asked – no, threatened – by his admirers within the PD to let the matter drop.

This time, however, due to his injuries being sustained in yet another police investigation as opposed to University business, she felt that she had genuine grounds for dismissing him for absenteeism.

And it had nearly worked.

However, luckily for Blair, and unfortunately for Edwards, the results of her machinations turned out to be far less drastic and punitive than she had hoped.

Thanks to the influence of Blair's mentor, Dr Eli Stoddard, and others on his diss committee, Blair had been allowed to finish and submit his dissertation. Although summarily dismissed from his teaching position, he had subsequently defended, and been awarded, his much-desired PhD. Nevertheless, he was made well aware that he would never achieve a tenured post at Rainier as long as Edwards remained in power, and he had to learn to live with that.

Although thrilled with his academic achievement, Blair had been devastated by the loss of his paid employment, his uncompromising determination to always pay his own way receiving a body blow. Jim had been at great pains to stress that Blair was no drain on his resources, and earned his keep in more than financial terms, but he realised that it would take more than his oft-repeated exhortations to convince Blair otherwise.

However, at that point, TPTB at the PD had come through with an offer of paid employment for the newly-appointed Dr Sandburg in the capacity of an official consultant. Although initially paid on a case-by case basis, it provided Blair with some personal income, and ensured his continued presence as backup and Guide to his Sentinel.

Of course, they weren't to know that Blair would have continued to support Jim even without financial recompense, but it was an added bonus for the pair that the young man's pride was restored somewhat, and he positively basked in the wonderment of being wanted both for himself and for his specific contribution to Jim, Simon and Major Crimes.

And once having settled into his new role, Blair had immediately made plans to take extra courses in Forensic Anthropology and Profiling, so that he could specialise in those fields and be of even more use to the department as a whole, and his Sentinel in particular.

Looking down again at Blair's peaceful face, Jim felt himself drifting at last towards welcome sleep, and allowed himself a few final stray thoughts.

As far as he was concerned, all was right in the Sentinel and Guide's world. They had been through hard times – painful times – but had made it through despite the odds. Their partnership was strong, loving and permanent.

They were accepted by most of the people who mattered to them, although they never pushed the 'gay' aspect, which was no one's business but their own after all.

Simon had become a true friend to both of them, and was a frequent and very welcome visitor to the loft.

And Jim had discovered an inner peace he would never have believed possible, and it was all due to the loving bundle of Guide in his arms.

Features relaxing as his eyes drifted shut; he was roused very slightly by a languid movement as Blair rubbed his cheek lazily against Jim's smooth chest.

"Hmmm, J'mmmm. Love you. My Sentinel, f'rever..." and Blair fell silent again, sound asleep once more.

Following suit, Jim murmured, "Mine. My Guide, always...", and slipped into slumber with a contented smile on his face.



The End