



## The Iron Ring

byFranscats

illustrated by Debbie Stone

### \*\*\*Naomi

Naomi Sandburg looked across the table at her friend, Sid Graham, and smiled. Reaching over the pristine white tablecloth, she took his left hand in hers, stroking his palm as she lifted the delicate wine glass with her right hand. "It has been a long time," she said softly, as her eyes twinkled with mirth, her voice low but full of suggestion. In the soft lighting of the small New York restaurant, her eyes glowed and the small laugh lines around her eyes didn't so much make her seem older, as more determined.

Sid Graham shook his head looking at the vision before him. Every time Naomi came into his life he wondered why he ever let her go. She was so vivacious and full of life, just what the doctor ordered for a man suffering a mid life crisis. But he knew the answer; you couldn't hold Naomi too long in any one place, she was the proverbial rolling stone. Even her son knew that. Blair was somewhere in the northwest, up by Rainier University. He had been there for years doing his undergrad and grad degrees in anthropology and was working part time on his doctorate while working as, of all things, a cop. Sid wondered what Naomi thought of that, her hippie son becoming so establishment. "How's Blair," he asked still caressing the long elegant fingers of the woman, her own fingers tracing circles on his palm.



Naomi sighed and pulled her hand back but smiled nonetheless as her eyes unfocused and turned distant. A look of tenderness crept across her features as she looked off and Sid realized no one would ever hold a dearer place in her heart than Blair Sandburg. Deciding he could live with that, he waited watching the thin animated face and sensuous lips. "When he did his graduate work studying the police department I wasn't worried. After all he was just observing but now," she shook her head before continuing. "But now, being a p..." she had been about to say pig, a reference left from her flower-child hippie days but stopped herself and swallowed. "A cop, I have to worry. If only that teaching position had come through."

"What happened?" Sid asked and watched the hazel eyes darken as her brow creased with unhappiness.

"Blair was with his mentor, Eli Stoddard, on some expedition in Borneo where he was researching tribal guardians when the old man took ill and the study was canceled. He came back planning to teach but all the positions were filled for the semester. Not being able to attend school full time his scholarships were cut and because he was supposed to be in Borneo the teaching positions were gone. So he needed a job for the semester and as he had just finished with the paramilitary police study he decided to enter the academy. I can't imagine what he was thinking doing that." She shook her short auburn hair. "He is still doing his doctorate in anthropology but he's working on it part time while working as a cop." Naomi sighed, wiping a small tear that pooled in the corner of her eye. She hadn't wanted her baby to

be a cop. She had wanted him to be an anthropologist and working on his doctorate part-time it would be at least a couple of years before he would be, a couple of dangerous years.

"Naomi, have you spoken to him about your concerns?"

The woman nodded, but shrugged, a slight hesitation, and snuffle evident. "He feels he can do some good and study the world around him while working on his doctorate. I'm just so worried he'll get hurt."

Sid Graham nodded. "How did he do in the academy?"

"Blair throws his heart and soul into every thing he does," there was a note of pride in the voice. "He finished top of his class last month and was given an award as Cadet of the Year and he's been walking a beat since." She looked at Sid, her own eyes staring into his blue eyes. "I know I'm being over protective but I'm so worried about him." Sid Graham nodded putting down his wine glass and rubbing his high forehead, ignoring what was left of his receding hairline and dark hair. As he considered her statement, their food arrived and he reluctantly released her hand as the waiter served the plates.

Looking down and lifting his fork to taste a delicately seasoned piece of meat, Sid considered that he knew the Commissioner of Police in Cascade. The man was writing an autobiography about the cases that had crossed through Cascade and Sid had to admit there had been some strange ones. He had gone to Cascade a few times to deal with the Commissioner regarding the memoirs. He could probably help Naomi with her boy and he might just get something out of it. Munching on a piece of meat he smiled and swallowed and then lifted his wine glass, taking a generous sip, as he considered how the night might turn out.

"I know the Commissioner of Police in Cascade," he began watching with interest as Naomi's eyes widened. "I could probably get Blair moved from the street to a department. It might not be any safer, but since he was Cadet of the Year there might be a way. I can't promise anything but I could make a call."

"Why don't we finish eating and then do that?" Naomi gave Sid her most brilliant smile and he nodded.

"I have the Commissioner's number on my desk, at home. Want to come home with me?" he asked, twirling his wine glass with an easy smile.

### \*\*\* Blair



Blair Sandburg looked around the squad room as the other cops padded out getting ready to go out on patrol, pushing folding chairs aside as they rose. The different flyers, most wanted lists, rules and warnings glared from walls, once white, now grayed with dirt, the glaring fluorescent lighting doing nothing to make them any more appealing. During the evening roll call, he had carefully listened to Sergeant Jones and had taken notes on the information about the latest crimes, criminals, etc. in the neighborhood he watched over. He was aware that some of the other, more seasoned (jaded his mind added uncharitably) officers had simply whispered jokes to one another before filing past in their dark blue uniforms. Blair was preparing to leave – sans a partner - when Sergeant Jones turned and called him.

Blair had been placed on the night shift in the Twenty-Seventh Precinct after the academy, the Commissioner wanting to show that even the Cadet of the Year could be placed in what was considered a difficult part of the city. And though Blair liked it, the cops he worked with and the people he protected, he was finding life as a rookie hard.

For one thing, he had already lost his partner. Paired with veteran cop, Jay Green, so the rookie could learn the ropes, the cop had suffered a perforated ulcer two weeks into the partnership and had taken early retirement. Blair had yet to be paired with someone else and each night ended up assigned as a temporary partner to someone whose “real” partner was out sick or on vacation. The Sergeant had found Blair could get along with almost anyone at the precinct and had used him as the rotation player; not an easy role for a rookie. After two weeks of rotations,

Blair was used to being the last out of the squad room and stood waiting for exactly who he would be working with this evening. He hoped it wasn't Sam Walters again. Sam Walters' partner was out sick with the flu and Blair had been working with him for the past two nights. Walters was just shy of abusive with the hookers and treated the street people like vermin. Blair didn't like working with him but couldn't say much; he was the junior partner still learning the ropes.

Sergeant Jones looked down at the young man. Jones was six-two with salt-and-pepper hair, and though gentle was not a word that would be used to describe the desk sergeant, he wasn't unkind either. "Sarge, if this is about what happened last night, I apologized to Walters," Blair began but Jones held up a hand. He knew if he let the young man start Blair would talk his ear off and he didn't want to add that Blair was the only person he had found who could stomach Walters for more than a few hours.

Blair didn't know it but he seemed to have this ability to calm Walters. The older officer hadn't been this mellow in years. Hell, Walters had boasted to his friends he would get the little hippie freak to quit by the end of the first night. Instead, Walters had slowed his usual tirade and had even smiled and seemed relaxed when he and Blair reported in at the end of the shift. Jones knew Blair would hate it, but he had actually been considering making Walters his permanent partner until word came down tonight that Sandburg was being moved.

"This isn't about last night," he intoned in his low gravelly voice, cutting off the young man. Blair had spent half of last night keeping Walters from causing some major ruckus with one of the gangs. "The captain wants to see you."

Dark blue eyes widened as Blair looked up at his sergeant and Jones had to smile. Blair was the shortest man in the precinct, and despite the fact that he wasn't the youngest by about two years, he looked youngest with his long hair tied severely back into a ponytail and his pierced ear. Word in the locker room was that he even had a pierced nipple. Vice would be all over him as soon as they saw him. "Did I do something wrong?" he asked unsure and Jones shook his head thinking he would miss the intelligent eyes looking up at him during roll call. He had known the kid was smart, too smart to stay a beat cop; he'd be upstairs as a detective in no time. Hell, he was smarter than a lot of the gold shields up there.

"Go on up and see the Captain," Jones replied saying nothing more. Rumors from Betty up in Human Relations were that the kid had some backing with the Commissioner, the proof being that he was being moved out of the precinct, that he had garnered some kind of political position. Jones didn't see it, the kid didn't look very political but the Cadet of the Year shouldn't have been thrown into a rotating shift his second week on the force either. Blair swallowed nervously and nodded before turning and heading out of the squad room.

\*\*\*Simon



Simon Banks, Captain of the Major Crimes Unit sighed, as he hung up his phone and looked down at his desk, with a frown. He had just finished a long, and ulcer-inducing, phone call with the Deputy Commissioner and considered the call for some minutes, shaking his head before getting up and making a pot of coffee. Somehow or other, the Deputy Commissioner had assigned the Cadet of the Year to Major Crimes and that didn't make any sense. The kid might be good - had to be good Banks amended, if he made Cadet of the Year but Major Crimes was filled with seasoned detectives and the kid wouldn't be welcomed. He hadn't earned a place in Major Crimes through blood sweat and tears and all the detectives on Banks' staff had worked their ass off to get in to the department. And if Major Crimes wasn't welcoming, his future partner would be 100 times worse. He was going to be partnered with James Joseph Ellison, two-time Cop of the Year recipient, partner-less, since his only successful partner, Jack Pendergrast, had died. The detective had been able to keep from having a partner by maintaining the highest solve rate in the state but having the high solve rate was going to backfire now. The Deputy Commissioner wanted the rookie partnered with Ellison and Banks had protested long and loud only to be told the decision was sent down from the Commissioner.

So what could Banks do? He couldn't exactly tell the Deputy Commissioner that his lead detective was a hard-ass who would crucify the kid. For one thing, the Deputy Commissioner

had to know that about Ellison already. The detective's reputation was well known throughout the PD. Most cops tried to avoid him and his glacial stare though several of the detectives in Major Crimes had become friends with him. That was a testament more to them than Ellison. For another, he couldn't tell the Deputy Commissioner that Ellison was going through some kind of sporadic medical problem, not without compromising Jim and Banks knew he was one of the few people Jim called a friend and trusted.

Simon could still remember when the medical problem had begun. Jim had gone off camping, if you'd call it that. His father owned a cabin a six-hour ride north of Cascade. Simon scoffed at the term cabin, a building with a two-car garage, three bedrooms, heat, plumbing, Internet and a satellite was not what he would call a cabin. It was a bit isolated, surrounded by a wooded area, just on the outskirts of a small town. The cabin actually sat in a clearing on the edge of a private lake and the closest neighbor lived on the other side of the lake. Jim had been pushing himself pretty hard and went up for some much needed rest, planning on fishing, sleeping and talking to no one. He came back from the quiet solitude worse than when he went. He started having problems with his hearing, his sight, sometimes even with smell, taste and touch and the doctors he went to couldn't find anything wrong with him. All the medical staff talked about was allergies and sensitivities. Sighing, Simon ran a hand across his face and adjusted his glasses. This day was going to be hell.

Pulling out his favorite stogie and sniffing it wistfully, he wished he could light it up but new building policy didn't allow that and he would have to settle for sniffing it as he ran over the file of one Blair Sandburg and waited for the rookie to show up at his door.

Two hours later, Rhonda knocked and opened the door. "Simon, Blair Sandburg is here," she told him and the captain nodded and indicated he should come in.

Blair looked around the bullpen and smiled nervously; aware of several speculative eyes as Rhonda, a pretty blonde secretary announced his presence. He couldn't believe that two nights ago he had been called into Captain Smith's office and told he was being transferred to Major Crimes. It was like some kind of dream. His jaw had dropped, as he stared at his Captain, speechless, standing before his superior, no mean feat for the sometime anthropologist. "Captain?" he had asked at last in a surprised voice and watched Smith shrug.

"Order of the Commissioner, Sandburg. Pack up your stuff; you're moving to Major Crimes." Captain Smith had given him a funny look then. "You must know someone up high to get the position you're being transferred to. So don't screw it up. You're going to be partnering with Jim Ellison, two-time Cop of the Year. He's ex-military and dogged about solving crimes." The tone had softened then. "But he is fair Blair. I know him. Be honest with him and he'll be a good partner. He can teach you a lot." Blair had shaken his head, the world spinning with the information. He didn't know anyone higher up and said so but the Captain had shrugged again and had dismissed him to go and clean out his locker. He was given the next day off because he was changing over shifts and then had appeared in Central Precinct, at Major Crimes.

Blair had deliberated long and hard on how to dress for Major Crimes. Technically, he wasn't a detective; he hadn't taken the test yet and couldn't for at least another eight months. But if he was partnered with one he wouldn't be wearing a uniform, so he found and pressed a nice pair of black jeans and button-down non-flannel shirt, tied back his hair and walked into the bullpen. Walking into Simon Banks' office and having the Captain of Major Crimes look him up and down speculatively, he wondered if maybe he should have worn his uniform. Especially since the captain seemed less than impressed. The captain had stood to shake his hand and then indicated he should take a seat.

"So, Sandburg, who do you know that you ended up in this department with orders to partner with my lead detective?"

"I don't know anyone Captain," Blair assured him. "This came as a total surprise to me." Captain Banks sat back at the statement and Blair could tell the captain didn't believe him. His look had turned guarded.



"Well, tell me about yourself, Officer," Banks commanded, watching the young man closely. And Blair spent the next twenty minutes talking about school, his failed expedition, and his paper on the police as a para-military organization. He had then gone on to describe his stint at the Two-Seven, the work he had done there and the officers he had met. Banks had asked a few questions and then sat back watching the young man, making Blair so nervous he had to force



himself to keep from fidgeting and babbling on. Turning insightful eyes on Blair, Banks shook his head. "Ellison is my best detective,"

Banks finally stated. "And he likes to work alone." He looked over the young man; the long hair tied back, the earrings. "Oh yes," he told himself, "this is not going to be pleasant." Smiling in a way that was anything but friendly he continued. "And he is not the friendliest of cops. You would have been better off having whoever got you placed here find you a job with someone else. Ellison plays hard and you're going to have to work to keep up with him. This won't be some cushy job." He watched as Blair prepared to protest but put up a hand stopping him before words came out. "You might want to consider calling whomever and getting a transfer out."

For his part, Blair steeled himself, pushing down his rising anger though his eyes sparked with annoyance as he looked at the captain. First Captain Smith and now Captain Banks were insisting some special favors got him here. Well, they were going to find out he could do the job. He hadn't made Cadet of the Year by being incompetent. "I told you, I didn't ask anyone to put me here but I know I can do the job, Captain Banks. Just give me a chance." Simon shrugged and rising, walked to the door and called Ellison into the room before moving back behind his seat.

A minute later Jim Ellison walked in and Blair got his first look at the detective. Blair was short, his frame was sturdy and he could usually hold his own in a fight but Ellison was tall and rippled with muscles and Blair had the feeling this man could take him down, easily. Looking up past the clearly toned stomach and chest, he let his eyes travel to the detective's face and looked into glacial blue eyes and carefully set face, deciding the detective was gorgeous. "Yes Sir?" Ellison asked, with a quick speculative glance at Blair, raising an eyebrow.

"Come in Jim. Close the door." Jim did and walked over to the window, the light behind him casting him in shadow, a strategic position not lost on Blair as the detective nodded at his boss. Captain Banks cleared his throat rubbing a hand across his forehead in preparation for the headache he was about to get. "Jim, I'd like you to meet Officer Blair Sandburg. Blair Sandburg, Detective First Grade, Jim Ellison."

Ellison nodded as Blair smiled up at the man with a bright smile that Jim had to admit was inviting. The kid was a looker, he decided as Blair rose and extended his hand. Grasping it Ellison gave a quick, strong shake, unconsciously noting the hand was firm and calloused from hard work, before turning back to Simon.

"Sandburg comes from the Two-Seven," Banks said, and then took a breath. "And he's your new partner." If Banks expected an explosion, he didn't get it and that worried him more than an explosion would have. Ellison stared at him and then let his eyes move over to Blair examining him a bit more critically before dismissing him.

"Is this a joke, Simon?" Ellison asked, noticing that the kid paled at the question but he could tell from his captain's expression that this was not a joke. Blair, realizing he should say something, started to turn but Ellison stopped him. "Look kid," he cut Blair off raising one hand to ward off the young man, not remembering the kid's name. "No hard feelings but I work alone."

"Jim," Banks warned and Ellison turned to him a twitching muscle in his jaw the only sign that he was tense as he stared at his boss considering what to say before turning back to Blair. The kid was still standing watching the two men, his face set with determination as he considered the situation. He had been through this before. On the rotation shift he had heard the same comment from several officers he been temporarily partnered with and suspected that the other cops he shared a beat with had made the comment to their captain privately before going out on rotation with him. They had all gotten over it. It seemed his youthful look put them all off. He had hoped Ellison would be less judgmental but he was sure he could prove himself to the detective. He had, after all, proved himself to all the temporary partners, even Walters.

"Could you excuse us," Ellison turned back to Blair. Blair looked up at Ellison, debating whether he should make a stand but then decided sometimes discretion was the better part of valor. He would wait and see what these two decided before digging his heels in. He knew he wouldn't allow either of them to throw him out. He had worked hard at the Academy to become Cadet of the Year and he had no intention of letting them paint him as some incompetent. If the Commissioner thought he was good enough to partner with a detective than they would have to give him a chance. With a nod, his back ramrod straight, his lips pressed closed to keep from babbling nervously (he always talked when he was nervous) he walked out of the room.

As soon as the door closed, Jim turned to Simon his jaw twitching with tension.

"Simon, come on. He's a kid, I don't need to baby sit him, especially right now."

Simon shrugged. "Not my call. I tried but the Deputy Commissioner wouldn't agree. Supposedly, the Commissioner wants to pair the Cadet of the Year with the Cop of the Year hoping the rookie will shine immediately." Simon paused and walked over to the coffee pot pouring two cups and handing one to Jim. "Off the record and not to be repeated, the Deputy said the Commissioner pushed it because of someone connected to the kid. So, watch what you say."

Jim nodded as he raised the cup to his lips. This was just what he needed, a partner he couldn't trust, especially now with the problems he was experiencing.

"Try it out, who knows maybe the kid will be okay. If not, he's stepped on a lot of toes to get here and he might find it uncomfortable enough to leave."

Jim took a deep breath considering his options – of which there were none - stood and walked to the door opening it and waving the rookie in. Blair entered slowly, scanning first Simon and then Jim who had taken his position at the windowsill.

"Look," Jim glanced across the room at the file on Simon's desk and the small print there, which anyone would have told him, he should not be able to read from his perch by the window, "Sandburg, we're going to try this out. But you need to know, I will expect you to follow my orders. If I say jump you say how high."

Blair looked up at him, internally debating what he should say, his lips pressed tightly together to keep from offering a scathing retort that might create even more hostility in the charged environment. He wasn't sure if a show of strength was what was called for here. Where some men might be impressed with macho bullshit, Blair suspected it wasn't what made this detective tick. He was good at sizing up people and didn't think Ellison needed some kind of reinforcement of his alpha male presence. Ellison, by his bearing, exuded strength. Instead, Blair studied the situation thoughtfully. As an anthropologist, he was used to holding back and observing his environment rather than jumping in. Getting the lay of the land, so to speak, before engaging and he was relying on that training now. Still not commenting, he turned to look at Simon Banks as the captain shot his head detective an angry glare. "Turn it down Jim," Simon ordered but nodded to the young man. "Understand this Sandburg, he is the lead detective. You follow his lead." Blair nodded saying nothing as Simon turned back to Jim. "Fill him in on your cases, introduce him to the others. I'll requisition a desk for him, though where we'll put it, I don't know," the words came out with a tired sigh.

Jim moved from his perch and stood; his body rigid. He could think of a few places where he would like to put the desk but none were worth repeating as he left the office, Blair in front of him.

Walking out into the bullpen Blair looked around, sapphire blue eyes moving over the people speculatively. Aside from the captain's secretary there were two men sitting at adjoining desks looking at some papers and Blair guessed, based on the way they shared the files, that they were partners. He wasn't sure where to put his things as he glanced around, not sure which desk was Ellison's and so he waited as the taller detective brushed past him, moving briskly to a corner desk and yanking open a drawer with enough force to make it ring and the computer monitor on it to tremble. The three other people in the room looked up at the sound; their eyes taking in Ellison's scowl before ducking their heads back down, the men shaking their heads and whispering. Blair couldn't hear what they said, their voices far too soft and low, but Ellison, across the room, and even further away from the pair, turned and glared at them. "Some of us are beyond high school and need more than a warm body every night, Rafe," Jim stated with annoyance and Blair saw one of two detectives look up, his handsome face turning red before he glanced at his partner, a large black man, who chuckled at his friend's embarrassment.

Turning back to Jim and idly wondering how the detective heard the whispered comments across the room, Blair decided aggression was needed if he was going to make himself a place in this partnership. Grabbing a rolling chair and pulling it over to the desk, Blair dropped his carryall on the floor before taking a seat, his face set as he tried to hide his nervousness.

"Jim," he began keeping his voice calm, "I know I'm young but-

"The name is Ellison," Jim snarled, as he continued grabbing files but glancing at his new partner he stopped. The kid was looking down, his face pale and set. Hell, to Jim, he looked like a kicked puppy. Reaching up to rub his temples against the headache that was forming behind his eyes, the detective berated himself. He had better control than this. "Look Sandburg, it's nothing personal. I just prefer to work alone." As Jim made the last statement, he grabbed the files he had gathered, and not even looking at Blair said, "come on," before storming out of the room and into the first available interrogation room where, he dropped twenty files on the table. "These are my cases. The top one is a priority because the Mayor is breathing down the Captain's neck over this case. The four behind it are also active investigations. The ten after that are already in the DA's hands and the last five are cold case files. Read through them," he ordered and, turning, without a glance at the young man, he walked out.

Striding back into the bullpen, Jim started for his desk as Captain Banks emerged from his office. "Where's your partner, Detective?" he asked. Two detectives and one secretary looked up at Ellison, all with questions on their faces as Banks stood in the doorway wondering what had happened in the five minutes the pair had been out of the office.

"The kid is in interrogation room three reading my files," Ellison replied coldly as he walked to his desk. Simon considered bellowing. Having the kid read the files was not the same as going over them. Reading would not give Jim's insights, but he couldn't bring himself to yell. Not this time.

"Okay but you need to sit down and go over them with him." He looked around the room, taking in the other detectives' stares. "And at least introduce Sandburg to the others," he demanded walking back into his office.

"Jim that kid is YOUR partner?" Henri Brown looked over as Jim took a seat at his desk and rubbed his temples wondering how the day had gone to such hell in so short a time.

Jim glanced at the two detectives and despite himself, smiled at his comrades. "You wouldn't want a second partner by any chance?" he asked.

Rafe chuckled at the question. "Come on, Jim. I have enough trouble with this one. No clothes sense." He shook his head in mock despair looking at his partner's less than stellar image. "Your hair boy would not improve my image." Jim nodded and turned back to his computer, wincing at how bright the screen seemed as he logged in.

Two hours later Blair entered the bullpen looking around at the people, his eyes wide with interest and just a little tension, before walking resolutely to Jim's desk a smile faltering as he glanced at the white-faced detective rubbing his temples. "Uhm, a... Ji...Ellison I've read the reports," he began hesitantly. "I have some ideas and questions."

Jim sighed and looked up as Blair took a seat beside him and glanced at the notes in his hands. "Let's start with the questions," he suggested. Blair nodded and glanced down at the paper.

"The Mards case, the one the mayor is so gung ho about, it's got to be about more than street people getting killed. Not that street people being killed isn't important," Blair looked up quickly, his eyes on Jim. He didn't want the detective thinking he would dismiss street people being killed as less worthy of investigation. "I mean, there has to be politics involved for the mayor to show this much interest, right?"

Jim nodded, acknowledging that the kid was bright enough to catch what wasn't in the report. "Some friend of the mayor's kid had run away from home and..." Jim stopped and shook his head. "It's not in the report but the third victim, Jason Whitney, he got the mayor interested."

Blair nodded. "In a way the mayor getting involved is a good thing. It pushed the crime from Homicide to Major Crimes, even if he did it for the wrong reasons." Blair glanced again at his notes. "The report says that of the four bodies found, two had been killed by strangulation and two by knife wounds but all had the same marks cut into their chests with the same weapon; the initials SG carved onto their chests. Was there any sign of oral sex?"

Jim turned off his monitor and rubbed his eyes momentarily trying to ease the pain caused by the bright glare before turning to his new partner. "Sandburg, they were living on the streets and selling their bodies. It would be bizarre if they didn't bear signs of sexual activity."

Blair nodded. "But I'm wondering if they might have signs of felatio just prior to their deaths. If they did, this could be some kind of homophobic thing?"

"According to the ME three had performed oral sex within an hour of their deaths and the fourth had evidence of having performed it as well though a bit earlier."

"If the motive was homophobia, the murderer may have witnessed the victims performing the act." Jim nodded his agreement. He had been thinking along the same lines.

"It's my theory as well," he admitted at last. "But until I have proof I can't really use it. What's got you going on this theory?"

"The SG," Blair answered tapping his notes with a pencil. "SG, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Biblical site of homosexual deviation." Jim considered the idea for a moment. There had been a lot of speculation about what the SG stood for but theorizing before the facts was not a good habit. Still, the kid had a possible connection.

"Good idea," he admitted and watched Blair's face light in a tentative smile at the praise. It only made Jim feel like he was kicking a puppy when he added, "But remember the theory has to fit the facts not the facts fit the theory." Blair nodded the smile slowly slipping away.

"Of course man, I'm studying to be an anthropologist. I use facts to develop theories all the time. The only difference is I look at things that are a few thousand years older than this."

Deciding he didn't want to hear anything more, Jim rose. "Come on, I'll introduce you to the others." He paused and took a deep breath finally accepting the inevitable, "Then we can go over my files."

Rafe and H were both pleased to meet the newest addition to Major Crimes and proved they were detectives by asking a series of questions that became more and more personal until Jim growled at them threateningly, declaring he and Sandburg had work to do. Holding up their hands to pacify Jim, they watched as the detective headed back to the interrogation room.

Blair practically bumped into Jim as the detective stopped at the door of the interrogation room and looked at the table, his jaw tightening visibly. His neat, well ordered paperwork was scattered all over the table, files haphazardly moved about, papers in disarray. Moving next to Ellison, Blair glanced up into the detective's face and then, with a frown, looked over at the table wondering what was bothering the man. "Something wrong?" he asked quietly and Jim forced his eyes away from the table and over to his new partner.

"Lesson one," he held up a finger. "Keep your files in order. This kind of mess might be alright at school but when you're dealing with people's lives you keep things organized. More often than not, the DA relies on your paperwork." Blair glanced at the table; most of the papers were in piles, sorted by case, just spread out a little. Okay, the detective was probably a little anal about work.

"Right," Blair nodded and took a seat to review the cases, inching papers together as he did. Jim glanced over shaking his head with a sigh as he reached for the first folder. They were still sitting there, files spread across the table (in much neater piles) when Simon walked in.

Jim glanced up at Simon and then immediately stood up, recognizing that something was wrong as the captain stood in the doorway. "They found another body Jim," he announced none too happily.

"Shit," Jim looked down at the files.

"The officers there are waiting for the crime scene unit and the coroner but they think this one might have been there a long time. It appears to be older than the others."

"Meaning the killer has been doing this longer than we initially thought," Blair filled in, his voice sounding a little strained and Simon nodded.

"You two better go." Jim nodded starting to gather the files but Simon stopped him. "You should get there before they move the body. You can reorganize the files later." He paused and glanced at Blair standing beside Jim. "Sandburg would you mind dumping these things on Jim's desk?" he asked.

Blair glanced at the captain realizing Simon wanted a private word with Jim; in all likelihood about Blair Sandburg, rookie, and considered whether to make a stand. Biting his lower lip and deciding he couldn't be sure that he was indeed the topic, he nodded and grabbing up all the files, ignoring Jim's wince as neat papers collided and mixed, he left the room, Simon watching him.

"Keep an eye on your partner, Jim. This is probably going to be his first real crime scene and it's not going to be very pretty. I hear animals may have gotten to the remains." He shook his head. "Let me know how he handles it."

Jim nodded and the pair headed back to the bullpen; Jim to get his jacket, Simon to take care of operations. Walking into the bullpen, Jim glanced over at Sandburg before reaching for his jacket. The rookie had dropped the files on the desk and grabbed his own jacket and was looking at Ellison wide-eyed. Jim could guess that the kid was nervous. This would probably be his first "messy" crime scene-possibly even his first murder - and no doubt he would feel a need to prove himself capable of handling a gruesome scene. And as bad and realistic as TV made crime scenes appear, they never compared with the reality. For one thing, the smell was missing on TV, for another, things weren't contained in neat little areas and at times (and Jim was sure this murder would be one since the body was found in the woods) the bodies weren't intact. Worse still, sometimes nature had begun the decomposing process and left things crawling in and out of the body. Hardened veterans could have trouble containing their stomachs and could wake screaming in the night after seeing scenes they didn't show on TV and Jim was pretty sure Sandburg was about to view one of those scenes. Deciding he had better bring a bottle of water for the kid, Jim looked over him critically, noticing the pale features and the tense body as he beckoned Sandburg to follow him, aware that the rookie was vibrating with pent up energy.

Idly, Jim wondered if he was ever as eager, pressured, or stressed about proving himself as he guessed Sandburg was. Probably not, he decided. Coming out of the Army Rangers had given him a degree of respect that Sandburg would have to earn. He'd even been offered a spot on a S.W.A.T. team when he first entered the PD but Jim turned it down thinking it was too much like being in the Army, and after Peru, he needed out. The deaths of his team had been too much and he needed a break.

Jim, as a soldier, was used to death in its very lurid forms, he had killed people, faced death head on and buried friends but he doubted Blair Sandburg had ever seen anything more than antiseptic death. "Yep," Jim told himself, "This is going to be hard on the kid." He was surprised to find some part of him felt bad about that. Pushing that feeling aside, he beckoned Sandburg over. "Come on Sandburg, you'll travel with me. He turned and headed for the elevator.

Blair's usual bounce was missing as he followed Jim down to the garage and looked around for a squad car before remembering he was traveling with a detective and wouldn't be in a black and white. It made him smile, despite the butterflies that had taken up residence in his stomach, as

he looked at the large blue and white truck that Ellison was approaching. His gaze going from the truck to his new partner, Blair took a good look at Jim Ellison and found himself envying Jim's build. Blair worked out when he could; he was in decent shape. He had after all graduated from the academy but his body wasn't meant to have the kind of muscles and abs that Jim displayed. For him to have anything that even approached Jim's physique he would have to spend a lot of time in the gym and between work and school it just wasn't possible.

Blair watched as Jim moved over to the truck, the man's graceful movements amazing. He moved like a cat, with fluid feline grace, and Blair sighed watching him. "If this were anyone but a cop..." Blair cut the thought off before it could go any further as Jim turned.

"Let's go Sandburg," he indicated the door and Blair, realizing he had been staring at his partner, quickly climbed in.

The ride out to the woods should take about 40 minutes Blair guessed but looking at Jim's speedometer figured they'd make it in 25. He glanced over at the detective as they traveled, hoping for some distraction with conversation, and then back out the window, nervously. When nervous Blair had a tendency to babble and knew it, so, he kept quiet for about 5 minutes. But the more he thought about what was coming, the more nervous he got about the crime scene, about not making a fool of himself, and about working with the two time Cop of the Year award recipient and so unable to contain both nerves and tongue he turned back with a forced smile.

"Hey man, you know this is like a tribal warrior thing. Tribal warriors defended the tribes against predators. Usually, they were animals but the principle still applies." He pushed back his hair and watched the man driving, a forced smile on his face.

"We're still dealing with an animal," Jim answered glancing at Blair as the nervous rookie continued, the smile fading.

"Tribal warriors defended the tribe and their space, hunted for food, and killed large predators. Of course," he added more to himself than Jim, "they probably had a sentinel to do the tracking."

"What's a sentinel?" Blair looked over at Jim in surprise. He hadn't realized he had spoken loud enough for the detective to hear and thinking back to the bullpen he remembered Jim hearing the detectives whispering from across the room. Ellison must have really good hearing he decided.

"In ancient times, tribes usually had a warrior with five heightened senses. He or she could see and hear things a normal person couldn't. The sentinel could feel and sense changes in the weather, taste when food wasn't right before anyone else could. The tribe's existence sometimes depended on the sentinel's abilities."

Jim listened thoughtfully saying nothing for a few minutes. Finally, he commented, "Those abilities wouldn't be useful in a city." There was a strange pitch to his voice and Blair wondered



about it for a moment before the impact of Jim's observation struck him. Blair glanced at his partner again in surprise. He wouldn't have thought Ellison would even care about anthropology but his conclusion was something Blair had been theorizing about. It was one of the reasons he doubted he would find a sentinel to complete his doctorate, at least until he had a chance to get back to the jungles of South America or the African bush.

"You're not kidding. In a city with all the smells, sounds, and the lights, a sentinel would need a guide far more than in the jungle."

"A guide?"

Blair nodded turning so he could watch Jim, nervousness forgotten, as he launched into his favorite topic. "Every sentinel had a guide to watch his back for two reasons. One the sentinel is bombarded with too much stimuli and can experience painful spikes as a result, and two, if he focuses too much on one sense he can sometimes zone out as a result."

"Zone out?" Jim asked quietly.

"Yeah, a sentinel can become so focused on one sense that he loses track of all the others and blanks out until something or someone brings him out of it. That was the guide's job."

"And you know all this because..."

Blair smiled. "I'm studying to be an anthropologist and came across a book written by Sir Richard Burton, the explorer not the actor, describing sentinels. I've wanted to find one ever since. They are the subject of my doctoral thesis."

"You're going for your doctorate?"

"Yeah," Blair answered self-consciously before discussing his foiled expedition and reason for entering the academy. By the time he finished, they were nearing the site and Jim looked over him thoughtfully.

"Listen Chief," he began, and Blair gave a quirky smile at the nickname coming on the heels of his tribal discussion, "this won't be pleasant and seasoned cops have gotten sick. Don't feel ashamed if this gets to you. No one will think worse of you."

"Thanks Ellison," Blair answered nervously. Jim looked over at Blair, his gaze softening.

"My name is Jim," said the detective and was the recipient of a brilliant smile in response. "Let's go." Jim reached in the back grabbing a water bottle and shoving it in his pocket before locking the truck.

The afternoon sun was slanting down in small patches, scattering rays of light among the trees and foliage, giving the area a dark foreboding tint, when Jim and Blair followed the trail to the scene. It was late, dusk settling in, the temperature 10 degrees cooler in the thickly wooded

area, the dampness slicing through jackets as the pair moved forward. Even Blair couldn't bring himself to speak in the dense humid setting as they followed the markers left by the crime scene unit.

It was a ten-minute walk, Blair traveling just behind Jim, biting his lower lip nervously, as he considered what they would face, his imagination filling in details until they reached the destination.

Giant floodlights were set up, and cops were moving around, examining the ground, as Jim moved directly to the body, nodding to the man squatting beside it. Dan Wolf, coroner, glanced up as Jim came and looked over the corpse, the detective's hand pinching his nose closed as he made a concerted effort to breathe through his mouth. Both men were upwind of the body but the smell of decomposition was still strong. Jim noted that none of the uniforms wanted to be anywhere near. Squatting down he nodded to Dan. "What have we got?"

"I'll know more after the autopsy but I'd say that the kid is about 20 and he's been here some time." He stopped and glanced at Blair as the anthropologist came to crouch by Jim.

"My partner," Jim said by way of explanation, "Blair Sandburg, Dan Wolf." Blair nodded and then turned his attention to the gruesome sight, Jim hearing a shaky breath and almost feeling the tremor that went through his partner. "How long do you think he's been here?" Jim asked.

"Long enough for some of the locals to start eating." Dan pointed to the legs where chunks of bone were visible through the ripped pants.

"But you're sure this is the same perp?"



"Oh yeah, he has the cuts," he glanced at Jim and then meaningfully at Blair. "This won't be pleasant," he warned as he reached one gloved hand forward to turn the body over.

Blair gasped at the discolored and distended stomach and then choked, a hand covering his mouth as he saw the white maggots falling away as Dan turned the body over. In seconds, he noticed the mass of little white worms crawling in and out of the wounds and spilling onto the ground. With a choked out, 'Oh Lord," Blair ran over to a tree and dropped to his knees, what little he had eaten coming back up as he violently retched.

Jim glanced over at the tree and then back at Dan. "I'll be right back," he said softly and received a nod as he walked over to where the younger man was kneeling, one hand against a tree trunk to support himself, as he retched. Bending, Jim put a hand on a very tense shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze. "Easy Chief," he said softly letting the hand move from his shoulder to Blair's back rubbing circles as he waited for the kid to finish. When Blair finally sat back, Jim reached in his jacket and extracted a bottle of water, opening and handing it over.

"Thanks," came the shaky response and then as Blair looked up into Jim's concerned eyes, a whispered, "sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, it happens," Jim glanced back at the coroner. "Will you be okay?" Blair nodded and waved Jim away as the detective went back to Wolf.

"His first crime scene?" the coroner looked over and Jim nodded. "Not a pretty one," the doctor signaled over the men with the body bag as he turned to some of the crime scene men. "Look around there may be more," Wolf paused. He wanted to say body parts but finished instead with "evidence," as Blair came back over.

"Sorry," Blair whispered, his face sheet white despite his embarrassment, as he avoided looking at the body.

Jim and Dan nodded. It wasn't unusual for someone to get sick at their first crime scene. "You get used to it," Dan answered with a smile as Jim looked around thoughtfully.

"How soon can we get a report, Dan?"

"I'll start as soon as I get back to the lab but this one is going to take a little longer than usual." Jim nodded his understanding and leaving Blair, Dan and Dan's assistant who came to stand beside his boss, began inspecting the site further and further from where the body was found. Blair started to move forward to join his partner, though what Jim could be looking at in the dark foliage was beyond him, but Dan laid a hand on his arm. "Wait," he said softly. "You'll get in Jim's way," he warned as he turned to his assistant. "Bet you five bucks Jim finds something CSU missed," Dan whispered. Blair turned to look at the men.

"Not gonna happen, not out here, it is too dark and overgrown," the assistant answered crossing his arms as Blair looked at the two men in confusion.

Dan smiled at Blair. "My Native American ancestors would have given Jim the name Eagle Eyes," he informed Blair. "The man's sight is amazing. He finds things that everyone misses." He watched as Jim crouched down in the dark, looking over the grass some twenty feet from where the body was found before calling for the CSU people and some light. Immediately, three officers came over carrying lights and squinting at a spot Jim was indicating before bagging something as the assistant with a resigned sigh handed Dan a five.

'Nobody's sight is that good,' Blair kept that observation to himself as Jim walked over twenty minutes later.

"What did you find?" Dan asked.

"A button and not from the kid. Let's hope Forensics can get something off of it."

Dan nodded and turned to leave, his assistant following, as Blair frowned watching Jim. Incredible hearing? Incredible sight? Blair looked more closely at Jim with the first gleam of a question mark.

### \*\*\*Questions

Blair and Jim were late getting back from the crime scene but could fill in little more information before Dan got the autopsy done, so Jim had dropped Blair by his car and had taken off for home and a few hours of sleep. But Blair found sleep impossible. Images of the body kept flashing back and he decided he wouldn't eat just in case the food didn't stay down.

Instead, he sat in the drafty warehouse he laughingly called an apartment and distracted himself by thinking about his new partner and his exceptional sight and hearing. Blair had been trying to find a sentinel for years; he wanted to write his doctoral thesis about sentinels and suddenly he might just have a chance. Yeah, he had met and tested people with one or two heightened senses before but they were usually wine or ice cream tasters or people with a really good sense of smell. Sight and hearing were a far cry from taste and smell.

Opening his laptop, Blair idly typed in Jim's name expecting to find some information about the Cop of the Year, but he was surprised when a five-year-old magazine article popped up. It was an article he had read before; Blair just hadn't connected it to the detective. It was about Captain James Ellison, a covert ops Ranger in the military, who, after crashing in the Peruvian jungle and losing his team in the crash had, with the help of an indigenous tribe, the Chopec, kept a pass in Peru clear of drug runners for 18 months before he was rescued. As a matter of fact, when Blair had read the original article five years ago he had wondered if this man could be a sentinel and had wished he could meet him. It seemed possible considering that an ill-equipped tribe had held the pass against modern weaponry but then Ellison would have been their secret weapon. Blair and his fellow anthropology students had discussed (with more than a little envy) what this man must know about the Chopec. The Chopec were a closed society,

not very welcoming of strangers, and living with them for 18 months was an anthropologist's dream.

Thinking this over and considering the man he had met today, Blair theorized that if he had been a sentinel then the Chopec would probably have helped him with his senses. Blair knew native tribes had oral histories of Sentinels and would know how to handle hyper senses especially in a jungle setting where there were fewer pollutants and stimuli. "I've got to ask him about this," Blair told the air as he considered the article. "Maybe Jim is a sentinel." Of course, Blair realized he would have to think about how to approach the topic. Jim didn't seem exactly open to talking about personal issues. As a matter of fact, thinking back, Blair realized he had done most of the talking. Not surprising, Blair knew he talked a lot especially when he was nervous but Jim had said little except, the anthropologist paused, Jim had theorized rather quickly how difficult it would be for a sentinel in a modern city. Perhaps because he was living with the spikes and zones, Blair thought.

Unable to sit still as excitement began to grow at his possible discovery, Blair rose from the beat-up almost spring-less old couch that he had inherited from a friend. He ignored the scurrying noises coming from around the room as uninvited roommates moved to hide and paced the room, thoughtfully revisiting every moment he had spent with the detective looking for clues that would prove Jim was a sentinel. There wasn't all that much to go on, he had only been with the detective for a few hours but they would be spending tomorrow looking over the autopsy reports and hopefully identifying the first victim. So Blair would have time to watch the potential sentinel. Maybe, he could even run a subtle test or two, something involving scent or taste. Giving this idea some more thought, he went to his cabinets, which were, as usual, bare of practically everything but spices, extracts and tea and pushed around the small jars until he found the one he needed. Placing it in his backpack, he glanced at the time and realized he needed to calm down and get some sleep if he was going to be useful the next day.

Getting ready for bed, Blair decided life was definitely getting more interesting. He was no longer a patrol cop and he was working with Ellison, a potential sentinel. Jim was a bit of a hard ass, kind of straight-laced and in need of some down time and loosening up, but he proved considerate and supportive when Blair had reacted to seeing the body and Blair knew Jim could have been far less understanding. Jim hadn't wanted a partner, he had been running solo for some time, and Blair wondered what tribal Gods he should thank for ending up partnered with him.

### \*\*\*Testing

The next morning the bullpen was just getting busy when Blair came rushing in. His car had refused to start that morning and he didn't want to be late on his second day with Jim. And he needed to pick up something for the little test he was going to run. Bursting through the doors, he glanced at the time; happily, he noted he made it with one minute to spare before he turned to study Jim.

The detective was rubbing the bridge of his nose, his eyes squinting at the computer screen as Blair bounced over carrying two cups of coffee. "Morning, Jim," he greeted and handed Jim a cup. "I picked these up on the way in."

Jim glanced at the coffee and smiled. "Thanks Sandburg." He took it and swallowed a mouthful and then glared down at it. "What did you put in it? Licorice?"

Blair looked over feigning shock. "Oh man, that must be mine. I had anise in mine. Sorry," he handed Jim the other cup. "This one must be yours." Blair grabbed the first cup and tasted the coffee. He had added a microscopic amount of anise extract to the coffee and no one who didn't have heightened senses would be able to smell or taste that drop.

Blair was just considering how he might test scent and touch when Dan Wolf called. Jim, picking up his line, spoke briefly to the medical examiner and then, hanging up, turned to Blair. "Dan Wolf wants to see us," he announced standing. "Down in autopsy."

Blair nodded. It was another place he wasn't too keen on going to. At the academy, he and the other cadets had seen the morgue but they had never been present at an autopsy. Hoping he wouldn't see the body, Blair followed Jim out of the bullpen and down to the basement.

The faint smells of bleach and antiseptic were immediately noticeable to Blair as they came off the elevator and so he wondered how Jim was handling the smell. Glancing over at him, Blair could see Jim's face was set in granite; a muscle in his jaw twitching as he practically ground his teeth. He appeared to be breathing through his mouth as he strode purposefully through the door of the Medical Examiner's office, and Jim's eyes seemed a bit watery. Blair guessed he might have a bit of a headache.

"Dan," Jim called and watched as the doctor came walking in from another room, the room Blair guessed where the bodies were stored. "You find something?"

Dan nodded. "This one put up a fight. I have some blood and tissue samples."

"You have DNA?"

"Enough that I could match it if you give me a suspect."

Jim nodded, "Anything else?"

"I sent the clothes off to a specialized lab at Quantico. There was some vomit on the clothes, I'm hoping they may be able to pull out what was the man's last meal which might give us a lead but nothing's come back yet."

Dan moved over to his desk picking up a report and handing it to Jim. "There were some hair samples on the vic. Short brown hair, probably Caucasian."

Jim glanced at the report Dan held out as Blair joined the conversation. "That makes sense. Though not always the case, most serial killers tend to stay within their own ethnic group." He watched Dan glance at him in surprise and shrugged. "Night school," he mumbled.

Jim glanced at Blair nodding and then at Dan. "Anything from the button?"

"I sent it to Samantha's lab. I don't know if she got anything off of it, you should check with her. But I can give you a name for this vic. He's in the database, George Myers. He's got a record, mostly petty theft, no prostitution though – or at least he was never hauled in for it."

Jim nodded writing down the info and then glancing again at the report before thanking Dan and setting off for Samantha's lab.

"Who's Samantha?" Blair asked walking beside Jim.

"Forensics," Jim answered looking over Blair. "And she's a bit crazy."

"Crazy?"

"Yeah, her last boyfriend, a detective down in Burglary, pissed her off and she nearly blew him up in her lab."

"And she's still here?"

Jim shrugged in response. "She's good at what she does."

A few minutes later, the pair found themselves in the forensics lab. Samantha, a pretty brunette with long hair and expressive eyes, greeted Jim as she looked over Blair with some interest.

"Samantha, this is Blair Sandburg, he's working this case with me," Jim stated and Blair noted Jim deliberately didn't say partner. He'd have to work on that.

"Hi," she smiled invitingly, offering Blair her hand. Blair took it with a matching smile of his own, holding the hand for a few moments longer than necessary.

"Did you get anything off the button?" Jim interrupted the obvious flirting signals.

"A partial," Samantha reluctantly turned back to Jim. "But between the DNA and the partial if you get him we'll be able to hold the perp."

"Thanks Sam," Jim turned and seeing Blair still staring at the pretty forensics expert nudged him forward. "Come on Chief, I want to check out George Myers. I think he might be the key to solving this case."

"Okay," Blair glanced at Jim as they walked back to the bullpen. "You think because Myers was never picked up for prostitution he knew the guy?"

"Yeah, that and the fact where he was found. His body was dumped before the killing spree started, so he might be the first and started the perp down this road."

"Maybe, a date gone wrong?" Blair asked and Jim nodded. "And just maybe a perp who enjoyed the experience and then killed the vic," Blair added thoughtfully. "So he continues doing this, telling himself he's killing the cause of this sin." Blair looked up, aware that Jim wasn't disagreeing. "So we interview everyone who knew George Myers and look for someone who might be a homosexual in denial."

"It's worth a shot," Jim agreed heading into the bullpen and firing up the computer.

Getting information and a picture of the late George Myers, Jim and Blair then headed off to examine the place where he had lived. Parking in front of an old building, Jim looked over at the address and back down at his notes. "Let's hope some member of his family still lives here," Jim said getting out of the truck. Inside the old building Jim wrinkled his nose at the stale smell as Blair watched him.

"You must have a strong sense of smell Jim because I don't smell anything," Blair commented and Jim shrugged as he headed up a flight of stairs to apartment 201. He knocked at the door and waited, Blair glancing from the door to Jim.

"Maybe, no one is home," he suggested. "We could find the super."

"No, someone was in the shower I just heard the water turn off," Jim answered knocking on the door again as Blair hid a smile. Touch still needed to be tested but there wasn't a doubt in Blair's mind that Jim Ellison was a sentinel.

After a few minutes, a voice called out from the other side of the door and then it was opened by a middle-aged woman who stared suspiciously at the two men. "Yes?" she asked pushing back wet hair.

"Good day, Ma'am. I'm Detective Ellison, this is Officer Sandburg." Jim held up his badge, "and we're looking for someone who knew George Myers. We understand he used to live here."

For a minute the woman looked at him blankly and then her face paled. "Georgie?" she asked. "Is something..." she stopped her voice trailing off as she opened the door wider indicating the officers should enter. "I haven't heard from him in six months," she said closing the door and leading them into the living room of the apartment.

It was an orderly place, painted in neutral colors but the furniture, while clean, was old and the TV was not exactly modern. The living room was large enough, but the eat-in kitchen was tiny, barely able to hold a table and two chairs. Further down the hall was the small bathroom and Jim could see into the bedroom. It was a nice size but obviously only one person lived in this apartment.



Indicating the two men should sit on the sofa, the woman took a seat in the armchair and looked at them. "Is he alright? He's not in prison again, I hope?"

Jim glanced over at Blair and sighed. "Can you tell me your relationship to Myers?" Jim asked politely.

"I'm his Aunt Jessie, Jessie Bedford."

"Ms. Bedford," Jim said softly keeping his voice level as he held out the picture. "Is this your nephew?"

"Yes," the woman's face had turned pale. "What's happened to him?"

"We discovered his body in a wooded area on the outskirts of the city."

"Oh," the woman stilled, face white with shock, her hands clenching and twisting in her lap. "I was afraid something had happened. Was," she paused taking a breath. "How did he die?"

"I'm afraid he was murdered," Jim answered. "And we're investigating the crime."

Blair nodded sympathetically. "Can I get you anything?" he asked but Jessie Bedford shook her head no, her brown eyes wide and glassy with tears.

"I hate to do this ma'am but we do need to ask some questions."

Getting up and walking over to the small table in the corner, she pulled a tissue out of a box and came back to sit before waving to Jim. "Go ahead, Detective."

"When was the last time you saw George Myers?"

"Two days before his birthday." She paused and then added, "That would be October 2<sup>nd</sup>." Jim nodded writing the date down as Blair glanced around the room, noting some pictures on the shelf, including one of Myers beside his aunt.

"Do you know any friends he might have been with? Anyone we can talk to about his disappearance?" Blair asked. "Someone who might be able to tell us a bit more about his life?"

"I met two of his friends," Jessie answered. "I don't know most of the people he associated with." Jessie shook her head sadly. "We weren't that close. He would really only turn up when he needed something or a place to sleep."

Blair nodded his understanding. "His parents?" he asked softly.

"They live in Maryland. I'll have to call them."

"Would you prefer the PD to do it?" Jim asked but Jessie shook her head.

"No, I'll call them," she sighed looking down. "After six months I'm sure they at least suspect something is wrong."

"Do you know where he stayed when he wasn't with you?"

"I'm afraid not."

Jim nodded, standing and Blair followed his lead. "When your nephew stayed here did he leave any personal items that we could look at? It might help us with our investigation."

Nodding, the woman rose and Jim and Blair followed her. "I gave him a closet to use," she indicated the small closet in the hall. "I keep my coats on one side, the other side and the shelves are his things."

"May we?" Jim indicated the closet as he pulled out a pair of gloves."

"Of course," she stepped away. "I'll just...call his parents." She walked back inside as Jim began a quick check of the shelves, Blair donning gloves and joining him. Half an hour later, Jim and Blair stepped back. They had gone through the clothes, the toiletries on the shelf, the small books, Blair leafing through the pages looking for notes, but there was nothing there.

Looking around, Jim could see Ms. Bedford; she was just hanging up the phone, tears on her cheeks.

"Thank you Ms. Bedford, if you could give us the names of the two friends."

The woman nodded numbly, her eyes red. "Ben Stag and Tim Cord. Tim lives on Second Street. I don't know where Ben lives."

Jim nodded writing down the names before handing her his card. "If you think of anything else that might help could you please call?"

"Of course," she walked them to the door and stood there hesitating. "Georgie's parents?" she asked. "When can they..." she paused and Blair gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Right now the coroner is holding the remains," Blair answered nodding to the card Jim had handed her. "But we'll let you know when the body is released." She nodded again opening the door.

Jim and Blair walked out of the door and considered Tim Cord's address. It was going on lunchtime and so Jim suggested stopping at a nearby diner before heading there. Blair readily agreed and the pair found themselves in a back booth of a small diner on First Street; a club sandwich and coffee in front of Jim and a grilled chicken salad and coffee in front of Blair.

Taking a swig of his coffee to steel himself for the conversation that he was planning on having, Blair smiled.

"Jim," he began, dark blue eyes intent. "You know I'm studying anthropology and working on my degree."

Jim nodded digging into the club sandwich.

"And I was studying police sub-cultures which is why I ended up in the academy." Jim again nodded, waving a hand for Blair to continue.

"I did my Master's work around tribal guardians," Blair stated, lowering his voice. "Tribes that flourished had what was called a sentinel or guardian. It would have been my doctoral thesis but I couldn't find a sentinel to study." Blair watched Jim thinking, until now.

"You mentioned this before, Sandburg," Jim answered but Blair could hear a note of caution enter Jim's voice.

Nodding, Blair schooled his face to hide a smile as he gave the mental equivalent of a "gotcha Jim," and took a sip of coffee. "Right. Sir Richard Burton, the explorer, not the actor, documented info on sentinels. They were people with heightened senses. They acted as an early warning system for the tribe."

Jim had stopped eating and was watching Blair.

"I know you're a sentinel Jim," he said softly, watching as Jim froze, his face unreadable. "Your time in Peru must be tied to your abilities," Blair added quickly.

"What do you know about Peru?" the words came out as a growl, but Blair, heedless, shrugged.

"You were with the Chopec man. They don't let strangers join their tribe, much less lead a war party. You had to have something pretty damn special to offer." He stopped a minute to give Jim a chance to confirm or deny his theory but Jim did neither just stared at him. "I know you're online and I just don't understand how you managed this long without support. Every sentinel had a companion, a person to guide the sentinel in dealing with his senses."

Jim finally looked away, his eyes on his plate. "They went away when I left Peru," he finally said. "But they came back when I returned from my vacation." Blair nodded waiting and Jim sighed. "The Chopec called me Centinela and the tribe's shaman, Incacha, helped me deal with them."

"Was your vacation in an isolated location?" Blair asked. Jim nodded. "That brought them back online but in an environment that is anything but sentinel-friendly." Blair leaned forward. "I can help you Jim, if you'll let me."

"Can you turn them off?"

Blair paused. It would never have occurred to him to turn them off. "No, man, you're online. But I can help you learn to use them."

"What's in it for you?"

"My doctorate. I'll do my thesis on you."

"Hold on Chief, I don't want people to know about this."

Blair nodded seriously. "I'll protect your anonymity." His smile turned brilliant. "Man, what you will be able to do. You're a walking crime lab."

Jim shook his head, this was not something he wanted but knowing his senses had been spiking, he finally nodded in resignation, deciding to ignore the problem for the moment. "Eat up Chief," he switched to cop mode. "We have to find Tim Cord."

"Yeah well, we have to do some baseline work," Blair answered. "I need to know what you can do, to establish control."

In response, Jim practically groaned as he picked up his sandwich.

\*\*\*Jim

No one was home at Tim Cord's address and, after talking to some neighbors and realizing Cord's mother was off visiting some friends, Jim and Blair headed back to inform Simon. Afterwards, dreading it, Jim went with Blair to Rainier University so Blair could run some tests on his hearing and eyesight.

The test results were impressive and Blair found himself bouncing with excitement as he read over test results, documenting them. By the time they were finished, it was late and Jim was a sporting a headache.

Jim dropped Blair off and headed home. In the morning, they were going to try and track down Cord and Stag and Jim needed some time to deal with the left turn his life had just taken.

Grabbing a beer and grimacing at the first swallow as he waited for his taste buds to calm down, Jim walked to his balcony and stared out at the bay, thinking, remembering, Incacha.

Jim's mission had crashed and burned in the jungle and Jim had buried his comrades despite his own wounds. He was in pain and he knew there would be no one to bury him as he sat down with his back propped against a tree. He was weak from his injuries and from the energy needed to bury his companions and he leaned back against the tree closing his eyes. He would take a small rest he told himself and then go in search of food and, more importantly, water.

He told himself he was in a jungle, he would find water, but he was weak and he suspected feverish and, well, the mission had gone to hell anyway. Closing his eyes, he listened to the sounds of the jungle, drifting off to sleep and then frowned opening them to stare a three natives looking down at him.

Deciding whether it was dangerous or a dream there was little he could do, he watched as one of the men pointed to him and turned to the others. "Centinela," he said, and the other two

took a step forward to look at Jim more closely. Jim was going to speak but his body had other ideas and instead he closed his eyes, passing out.

The next 18 months he spent in the jungle. The Chopec had nursed him back to health and then added him to their hunting parties. He, in his turn, had led them in defending the Chopec Pass and keeping drug runners out of tribal lands. In the beginning, Incacha had been at his side constantly, a hand on his arm or back, steadying him and though Jim hadn't realized it then, pushing him to use his senses to track game, people and weather. Guiding him! He could remember Incacha telling him that he would need a guide when he went home.

Listening to Blair in the diner, the memories had come back to Jim. He had been the Chopec sentinel!

### \*\*\*Detecting

Blair stretched his muscles getting out of bed, feeling the pull against his skin. It felt good and he enjoyed the sensation for a moment before glancing at the time, smiling. He was up earlier than usual, despite a late night of testing Jim's senses then writing up his observations and suppositions. He had even emailed his advisor last night asking for an appointment, wanting to change the topic of his dissertation and get going as soon as possible.

Moving through his warehouse, Blair moved to the coffee pot in autopilot. He made a cup as his brain worked on how to test and document Jim's senses and how to use them on the job to best advantage.

He acknowledged that he was the rookie and junior partner, but the dynamics of the relationship had changed drastically with Jim's admission that he was a sentinel. Jim needed him! Suddenly, things were a bit more balanced.

Drinking his coffee as he gathered his clothes for the day, Blair marveled over how in just one week his life had taken such a drastic turn. He was doing his doctorate on his favorite subject – sentinels, he was no longer walking a beat with various cops and he was in Major Crimes partnered with the best detective in Cascade. And though Jim the man was a bit distant, Blair could sense a fun-loving soul behind the walls he put up. Blair just needed Jim to drop his guard a bit and Blair was sure he could get Jim to do just that in time. All he had to do was make himself indispensable as a sentinel's companion and keep pushing against those walls.

Blair suspected Jim would be a great friend. Too bad the man was so obviously straight but, thinking it over, Blair decided it was a good thing Jim wasn't gay. A researcher did not sleep with his subject.

Getting dressed and heading out, Blair considered the case they were working. How could Jim's senses push the case forward? It was because of Jim's senses that they had found the button but there must be other ways his senses could help.

He was still considering this when he arrived at the station, heading straight into the bullpen. Jim was already there squinting at the computer screen and Blair frowned. Obviously, sight was sensitive and Jim needed help with it. Bouncing over he sat down beside Jim still considering what to do. "Jim, try and picture a dial, you know a volume control but plaster the words 'sight' onto it."

Jim glanced at Blair and frowned. "What?"

"A dial with sight on it; picture it."

"Sandburg?"

"Do it," Blair insisted softly. "Close your eyes and picture it."

Jim sighed for a moment then obeyed closing his eyes. "Yeah, okay."

"Imagine that the dial controls your sight. What's it set to?"

"Eight," Jim answered and Blair winced. With his senses set that high he was probably getting spikes and headaches all the time.

"Okay, I want you to lower the dial, bring it down to three." He watched Jim frown again. "Just breathe slowly, in and out, in and out and as you exhale push it down."

Jim did, and then opened his eyes surprised, and looked around with a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

Blair nodded. "I want to walk you through the same exercise with your other senses."

Jim nodded glancing around. "Not in the bullpen, Chief."

"Let's use an interrogation room. This is important. With your senses set so high, you must be getting headaches on a regular basis." Jim didn't confirm the theory, but stood.

It took forty minutes but at the end, Jim's features didn't seem so pinched and Blair realized Jim had been experiencing headaches constantly. He would have to address the issue with Jim. He needed to know when Jim was having trouble with his senses, which meant Jim would have to talk to him, something Jim was not inclined to do.

Walking back into the bullpen, Jim moved back to the computer and began researching the two men connected with George Myers, Blair reviewing Myers' records one more time. Taking some notes from the DMV database and writing down some info, Jim turned and grabbed his jacket.

"Let's go Sandburg, I want to talk with Tim Cord."

Blair nodded, swallowing the last of his coffee and grabbing his jacket, he followed Jim out.

In Jim's truck, as they drove towards Cord's address, Blair pulled out a small notebook and opened it glancing at Jim. "Jim," he said softly. "I think we can do more with your senses than

turn them down. Sure, it's great that you can find a button in the grass, but well, I think they can be used as a natural lie detector."

"What do you mean?"

"Humans have certain physical reactions when they lie. Their respiration increases, heart rate goes up, body language changes. Some people are trained to look for physical signs of lies."

"Good interrogators," Jim replied.

"Exactly, but they can only rely on visual cues. I think you could do it with ease, using visual and auditory cues. If you tune into a suspect's respiration and have some knowledge of his normal state before questioning, then once you start," Blair trailed off with a wave of his hands.

"But everyone gets nervous when being interrogated by a cop."

"True, but if you ask a few questions to gauge their typical responses, I bet you could identify an atypical response."

"I suppose," Jim agreed. "We sort of do that now when we interview a suspect."

"But you can take it to the next level." Blair paused and then added, "I'll start the questioning while you watch. I'll ask some questions that will give you a baseline. Then we'll ask some harder questions and you'll know if we have a suspect."

Jim nodded. "We can try," he agreed sounding a bit less than sure.

Jim and Blair found Cord's mother readying for work when they arrived at the address they visited the day before. She looked to be in her 50s but Blair suspected she was younger and that life had been hard on her. It was obvious to the anthropologist in Blair that she was financially strapped as she invited them in and put her peanut butter and jelly sandwich in her bag before turning.

"Mrs. Cord," Blair began, hoping Jim was tuning into the woman. "We're investigating the death of George Myers."

"George Myers?" she repeated stopping her movements to stare at the two officers, her eyes wide. "How?"

"He was murdered," Blair continued and Mrs. Cord leaned back against the kitchen counter staring at the cops.

"My son cared about Georgie, if you think he had something to do with this," anger began to sink into her voice as she moved to protect her son, but Blair shook his head.

"No, ma'am," he interrupted. "We're trying to interview people who knew him to get some leads."

There was a pause and then a sigh as the woman waved them to seats at the round Formica kitchen table. "Georgie would sometimes crash here," she said honestly. "He and Tim were friends."

"Could we speak with your son?" Blair asked and Mrs. Cord nodded.

"He's sleeping. He was working late at the club last night. He's a waiter." She turned and left the room and Blair eyed Jim wondering what, if anything, the sentinel was picking up as Jim's eyes roamed the small living room. A few minutes later, Mrs. Cord walked back in, her son beside her, Tim looking at the cops through bleary eyes.

"Good morning," Blair stepped forward holding up his badge. "We're investigating George Myer's death and would like to ask you a few questions."

Tim blinked, his blood-shot eyes widening. "George is dead?"

"Yes Sir, and we are trying to interview his friends and acquaintances."

Tim nodded. "I haven't seen him in months. When?" he paused for a breath. "When did he die?"

"Months ago," Blair confirmed and Tim rubbed a rough hand across his thin face before turning to his mother.

"Mom, got any coffee left?"

The woman nodded turning back to the kitchen and pulling down a coffee cup. Turning, she looked at Jim and Blair. "Can I get you something?" she asked.

"No thank you," both men answered, Blair's answer accompanied by a smile. Mrs. Cord nodded and carried over a cup for her son and took a seat near Tim. They might be the police, but she wasn't leaving her son unprotected.

"Can you pinpoint the last time you saw George Myers?" Blair asked.

Tim considered the question. "I'm not sure," he glanced off thoughtfully. "We were at a bar." Tim frowned. "Yeah, we were at Rovers. It was me, Georgie and Ben. Georgie had lost his job the day before. He had been working as a dishwasher at a small bar down in the industrial park, Pinky's or Petey's, something like that. The boss caught him drinking some of the stock and had fired him. He was talking about heading down south to see his family. That's why I didn't think about his not being around." Tim shook his head and lifted the cup, taking a drink before continuing. "I asked Ben about Georgie and Ben said he thought Georgie had gone home. I figured I'd hear from him when he came back." Tim considered the two officers. "I don't know the date but you could probably figure it out if you ask the owner of the place where he worked when he fired Georgie."



Blair nodded and glanced down at his papers. "I have to ask. Did Georgie have any problems? You mentioned drinking?"

"Was he an alchy? Nah. I mean he liked to drink but he wasn't one to overdo it. The day the boss caught him, he'd broken up with his girlfriend."

"Who was his girlfriend?" Blair asked holding his pen over his paper.

"Jenny King. They weren't going out too long."

"What was the break up over? Was it an old girlfriend?"

"More like an old boyfriend," Tim muttered softly.

"Excuse me, I didn't hear you," Blair answered; sure with Jim's ears he would hear what Tim had muttered.

Tim cleared his throat. "Look, Georgie had some identity problems, if you catch my drift."

"You might want to spell it out for me," Blair answered. "We're not here to condemn alternate lifestyles. We're looking for his killer."

Tim nodded. "Georgie said he was bi, but I doubt Jenny would agree."

"He was homosexual," Blair concluded.

"Yeah and I guess Jenny didn't like playing second fiddle."

Blair nodded sympathetically. "Any other problems, Gambling, Drugs?"

"No."

"You said you were with George Myers and Ben?"

"Yeah, Ben Stag."

"Can you tell me where I can find Jenny King and Ben Stag?"

"Ben lives at 31 Fuller. I don't know Jenny's address but she works in the local farmer's market on Grayson. That's where she met Georgie."

Blair studiously wrote the information and turned to Jim.

"One more question, sir," Jim said watching the man. "Did you have a problem with Georgie's lifestyle?"

"Me? No. Georgie and I grew up together. It was a never a problem between us."

"What about Ben Stag?" Jim continued.

"Ben didn't know about Georgie," Tim answered. "Georgie was always afraid to tell him."

"Why is that?"

"You know Ben would make jokes about gays. Nothing you don't hear every day but it made Georgie nervous about coming out to him."

Jim nodded handing both Tim and Mrs. Cord a card. "If you think of anything that might help us with the investigation, please let us know. You can reach us at that number."

Tim nodded as Mrs. Cord walked them to the door.

Outside the door Blair turned to speak to Jim but the detective held up a hand for silence as he tilted his head listening. For a minute, he listened and then nodded to Blair as he started down the hall.

"Did you detect anything?" Blair asked.

"No. They were nervous but nothing spiked and when we left, Tim Cord told his mother he couldn't believe Georgie was dead. I think we can safely exclude them."

"Where to next? Jenny King or Ben Stag?" Blair asked as they made their way out to Jim's truck.

"Let's see if Ben Stag's around; we have his address."

Blair nodded, climbing into the truck and pulling out his pad to write up the notes on Jim's senses.

Ben Stag wasn't home and a discrete discussion with the neighbors told Jim and Blair that he usually spent his afternoons playing basketball in one of the local schoolyards. Deciding to come back later, the two went back to the PD to look up Jenny King; getting her address before heading over

There was nothing in the database on Jenny King so Jim and Blair headed over to Grayson Street and the local farmer's market.

The Grayson Street Farmer's Market was a large building filled with tables of fresh produce, all organically grown. Walking along the stalls, Blair eyed the food with admiration. "Man, some of this stuff looks really good. Look at those tomatoes. I bet they're as sweet as they look and look at those pears. Maybe I should buy some of this stuff while we're here."

Jim, who had been finding the smell of the flowers annoying, glanced at Blair. "Jenny King first," he answered.

"Of course, but we do have to have lunch and I know there is a great salad bar here."

"Salad?" Jim's voice reflected what he thought of that idea, which wasn't too appealing.

"Let me guess, you live on fast foods with a high fat content."

"Wonderburger," Jim agreed.

"Man that stuff will kill you. You, of all people, should be eating organic foods." Blair shook his head disapprovingly as they made their way to the back. "I can't believe you haven't had any problems with your sense of taste."

Jim didn't answer, mostly because sometimes he did have problems with the foods he ate. He could still remember the last time he went out to eat with his ex-wife Carolyn and thought the chef was poisoning him. Ignoring the comment Jim stepped forward asking to see the manager and holding up his badge. They were quickly escorted into the back where empty delivery boxes were stacked high. "Can I help you gentlemen?" a nervous, balding, middle-aged man stepped forward. "I'm the manager, Mike King."

"Mike King?" Jim questioned. "Any relation to Jenny King?"

"My daughter," the manager agreed nervously.

"We would like to speak with Ms. King."

"Why what's wrong?"

Blair smiled to lessen the man's tension. "We're interviewing people connected with an ongoing investigation."

"Ongoing investigation?"

Blair opened his mouth but Jim answered. "We're not at liberty to discuss it. May we speak with Ms. King?"

The man nodded and led Blair and Jim to an area in the back where a young woman was working on a computer. "Jen," he called. "The police are here. They want to speak with you."

The girl looked up from her work with a frown. She was pretty, or so both Jim and Blair thought, with short brown hair and light green eyes. "Can I help you?" she stood and walked over to the men as Jim held up his badge.

"This is Officer Sandburg, I'm Detective Ellison. Could we speak with you in private," Jim asked, indicating the nervous father standing near.

"Of course," she answered. "Dad." The manager nodded and left the room.

"We are investigating the death of George Myers," Blair began.

"Georgie?" she looked shocked and leaned against the crates to stare at the two men. "When, how?"

"His remains were recently found in the woods and we are interviewing people who knew him. We understand you and Mr. Myers were intimate."

The girl gave a small laugh. "If you want to call it that." Seeing the puzzled looks she continued, "Georgie and I dated but," she paused. "Georgie was in denial. He wasn't actually interested in me. I didn't have the right equipment."

"Did something happen?" Blair asked.

"Not much, if you get my meaning," she sighed and twisted the small ring on her right hand, an obvious nervous gesture. "We broke up when he finally admitted he wasn't interested in me."

"When was that?"

"Maybe six, seven months ago. I'm afraid I can't give you a more exact date."

"Did you know any of his friends who we could interview?"

Jenny considered this for a moment. "His best friend is-was-Tim Cord. Ben Stag was another friend. I really didn't know of anyone else. We weren't going out very long."

Blair nodded as Jim fished a card out of his pocket. "If you think of anything that would help our investigation, please give us a call."

The two men left the office and Blair moved over to the deli counter. "Come on Jim, this is a perfect time for lunch." Jim grimaced but followed Blair over to the counter ordering sandwiches before heading back to the truck to eat and talk.

"I think we can safely say George Myers was a homosexual in denial," Blair stated before taking a bite of his sandwich. Thinking it over, he continued, "So whether it's Ben Stag or not, Myers must have met up with the killer. Probably when he first came out."

Jim nodded his agreement. "He came out to the wrong person or persons."

"When I first..." Blair stopped, realizing he was about to discuss his own sexual orientation with someone who could be the poster child for straight America. But for some reason Blair didn't think Jim would be troubled by it. He didn't get that vibe, Jim didn't seem down on the gay community and he was doing his best to find George Myer's killer.

"You're gay?"

Blair sighed. "Bi man. I like gals and," he added with a rueful smile, "guys." Hoping Jim wasn't a homophobe Blair watched Jim closely, relieved when he didn't see revulsion.

Jim nodded. "Most cops don't really care. They're on the streets enough that they've gotten used to alternate lifestyles. But I wouldn't go announcing it if I were you. Some of the older

cops might not be as tolerant.”

Blair nodded, remembering Walters. “I worked with one just after the academy.”

Jim crumpled up his garbage and tossed it into a bag on the seat. “Let’s try and get hold of Ben Stag.”

31 Fuller Street was located on a quiet block. Spotted with small front gardens, the neighborhood wasn’t rich, but the houses were, for the most part, well kept. Pulling up and looking at the three-family house with the small porch in front, Jim moved to the door, ringing the doorbell for the second floor. After a few moments when there was no answer, Jim impatiently rang the downstairs bell.

A minute later an elderly gentleman opened the door. “Good afternoon, Sir,” Jim began holding up his badge. “I’m Detective Ellison, could you tell me if Mr. Stag lives here?”

“Ben?” the older man peered at the badge. “Yeah, he lives here with his sisters. But they’re not home right now. What’s this about?”

“We’re interviewing people related to an ongoing investigation. Can you tell me where I would find him?”

“On Thursday afternoon, he’d be down at the construction site on Marlboro. He sometimes works there hauling stuff to make some cash.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Jim nudged his partner and the pair started down the steps to the truck.

“Should I tell him anything?” the old man called after them.

“Not necessary Sir. We’ll go over to Marlboro and if he’s not there, we’ll come back later.”

Jim got in the truck and starting it glanced over at Blair confirming what he had said to the old man. “We’ll go over to Marlboro and if that doesn’t pay out head to the PD and return this evening.”

Blair considered this and then shook his head. “A construction site might not be the best place for you Jim. There’s usually a considerable amount of debris pushed around in the air, especially on a windy day, which today definitely is. The dust might not be the best thing for you and the noise,” Blair again shook his head.

“I’ll try not to breathe, Sandburg,” Jim grumbled as he headed for Marlboro.

The Marlboro construction site was somewhat infamous throughout the city of Cascade. Begun as a giant office complex almost two years earlier, it had gone through three different contractors, the first ending in jail when it was discovered he was using inferior materials which caused the death of a worker, the second going bankrupt and causing a major headache for his

investors and the latest contractor trying to finish the job for the bank that had foreclosed on the property.

Pulling up outside the high chain-link fence with its trespass and warning signs, Jim glanced at the huge machinery moving around the rising skyscraper as cement trucks poured concrete into what appeared to be the foundation of the second of two buildings and jackhammers pounded on the ground some feet away. Blair, sitting beside him in the truck, reached out a hand and rested it momentarily on Jim's arm. "Jim lower your hearing dial. This place might be painfully noisy for a sentinel."



Not liking that his senses were interfering with what he wanted to do, Jim grumbled again but did as Blair instructed. Moments later, Jim got out of the truck and indicated a trailer near the gate that proclaimed the company's name as Blair trailed slightly behind looking around, keeping one concerned eye on Jim and the other on the site.

Walking over to a trailer, the only functioning building that wasn't a port-o-potty, Jim knocked. After a moment the door opened and a tall man looked over at the pair. "No one's supposed to be on this site," he began loudly to be heard above the noise but Jim stopped him by the simple expedient of holding up his badge.

"We're looking for Ben Stag," Jim almost yelled and the man gestured them inside closing the door. There was dust everywhere but at least it was a bit quieter within as the two officers followed the man in and Jim gave a sigh of relief before sneezing. Blair gave him a look that would have translated to "I told you so," before turning to look at the man he guessed was the contractor.

"Stag sometimes acts as a gofer here going to pick up things but I told him I wouldn't need him today," the man informed them. "Is he in trouble?"

"No, we just wanted to interview him in connection with an ongoing investigation," Jim answered, a hand over his nose to filter the dust.

The contractor nodded, picking up and sipping his coffee as he watched them. "Stag usually comes by once a week looking to make some quick cash. He sometimes talks about some lake he likes to fish at. I think he had some camping stuff with him this morning. He had his backpack with him."

"Do you know where the lake is?" Jim asked and the man shook his head.

"I don't but Jerry might. He sometimes talks to the kid when they eat." Walking to the door the contractor headed down the stairs and over to where the cement was being poured, Jim and Blair following. "Jerry," he called waving a hand and a second man walked over, eyeing the worksite intruders. "Jerry, these guys are looking for Stag."

"Why?" the man eyed Jim and Blair suspiciously and Jim once again held up his badge.

"We're interviewing people in connection with an ongoing investigation," Jim repeated.

The man eyed them and then shrugged. "He likes to fish up at Spring Creek. I think he was going up there this weekend. He said something about being back on Monday and maybe he'd bring some fish for lunch."

Jim smiled. "Good fishing up at Spring Creek?"

"Don't know," Jerry answered, "but he has brought in some nice trout in the past."

"Maybe we'll ask him about his fishing spots when we see him," Jim answered before thanking the two men and heading towards the truck.

By the truck Jim gave one more sneeze before climbing in and Blair shook his head. "I could have done that without you, man," he began, but Jim held up a hand.

"This is my job, Sandburg." Blair didn't answer but gave a sigh of resignation. In some ways he knew Jim was right but as a sentinel Jim also needed a bit more protection from his environment. Tribal sentinels didn't have to deal with construction sites.

"Okay," he offered as Jim considered the information they had on Ben Stag. If this guy was a closet homophobe, this might be the chance to catch him. Glancing over at Blair, with his long curly hair and earring, gave Jim an idea and he smiled. Blair, noticing the predatory smile, raised an eyebrow in question.

"You know we could try and trap Stag, if he is the murderer." Reaching out, he tugged on one of Blair's curls. "What do you say, Chief. Want to act as bait?"

"You think I could act as bait?"

"With that earring and hair, I think you could pass. Why don't we go back to the PD, I want to run the idea past Simon."

### \*\*\*The Trap

Blair sat beside Jim as the detective outlined a plan. The idea was simple enough. Find Ben Stag, make him think Jim and Blair were engaged in sex and then separate and see if Stag reacted and followed either man.

"Jim," Simon answered. "The idea is fine but are you going to make it look realistic enough? I mean-"

"Simon," Jim cut him off. "I was in Vice. I know how to make it look real when it isn't. I was part of a lot of stings."

Simon nodded thoughtfully before glancing at Blair. "You're okay with this? You don't have Jim's experience with stings and Vice. I could get someone from Vice if you're uncomfortable."

"I'm Jim's partner. I'll be fine," Blair answered and noted Simon's look of approval.

"Alright, I want both of you wearing wires for this operation. Detectives Rafe and Brown will back you up and Inspector Connor will coordinate the sting. Let's get a conference room and fill the others in."

Two hours later, set up with wires and the team in place, Jim led Blair down a path towards Spring Lake. As they made their way around the lake, Jim's sharp eyes watching for Ben Stag. Half way around the lake he stopped and pointed to a man coming out of the trees some distance away. "There's Stag," he pointed speaking quietly.





To Blair, the man was little more than a spot in the distance but knowing he stood next to a sentinel he nodded.

"You know the scenario," Jim continued. "We'll move around so we're in the trees behind him and get close enough so that he knows what we are doing." Addressing the wire, Jim told Connor Stag's location so she could move the detectives around as Jim and Blair entered the woods moving around behind the point where Stag had come out of the woods. Nearing the lake, Stag yards away, Jim whispered softly, "Ready?"

"I'm ready," Blair agreed as Jim leaned against the trees and Blair dropped to his knees, his back to Stag so he couldn't see what was actually not happening. Jim seeing Blair before him, deliberately pushed down his sense of touch to near zero. It

wouldn't do to get hard with Blair bent over his crotch as he sternly reminded himself that this was work, not play and this was his work partner, not a sexual partner.

Groaning loudly to get Stag's attention, Jim called out, "Yeah, that's it good. Keep doing that," as he moved his hips moaning. Eyes half slit, Jim watched Stag turn as the pair continued their gyrations, Jim's moans getting louder and faster until Jim yelled, "Yes," and slumped back against the tree.

Blair bent over, pulled out a handkerchief, wiping his face as he reminded himself that he was working and should ignore the gorgeous man he was working with. Jim was: one, his work partner and two, his sentinel research subject and was therefore completely off limits. When he was sure his libido was under control he looked up winking. Jim made a show of reaching into his back pocket to pull out money, dropping bills into Blair's hands. "Thanks, I'll see you here on Tuesday," he stated loudly before turning and walking away into the trees, starting up the path until he was out of sight then moving unerringly to where Megan had set up the sting oversight.

"You sounded convincing, Jimbo. You sure it was an act?" she asked with a wicked smile.

Jim snorted watching as Blair sauntered down to the lake and sat down by the water's edge leaning back on his elbows to catch the sun. He could see Ben Stag watching Blair before looking around to make sure they were alone and starting over.

"I think he's taking the bait," Megan whispered handing Jim a pair of binoculars. Jim didn't need them but he picked them up and held them as Stag stood over Blair. Dialing up his hearing he could hear every word as Stag asked Blair what happened to his friend.

"Friend, hardly?" Blair answered with a laugh. "He's not my friend." He gave Stag a furtive smile. "He's a customer of mine."

"Customer?" Stag said slowly eyes narrowing. "You're a prostitute?"

"If you've got a problem with that, just go fish somewhere else, man."

Stag didn't answer but moved closer and Jim could see him finger his pocket. Deciding that Stag was going to make a move he motioned to Megan.

"I think something is going to go down. I'm moving in closer," he said softly. Nodding, she radioed the other detectives to get closer before moving with Jim as Stag continued to stare at Blair.

"I just wondered how you could do something like that," he said.

"I enjoy it," Blair answered with a lopsided grin looking up at Stag as he noted the man playing with his pocket. "And it makes money. You want to pay and find out how good I am?"

Stag shook his head, again glancing around. "It's evil," he said angrily. "The Lord wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah for this type of perversion."

Blair readied himself as he listened to Stag, noting the man's strained voice. He could feel the tension in his own body coiling in preparation as Stag moved closer but he tried to appear relaxed, shrugging off the comment, needing Stag to implicate himself. Stag hadn't admitted to anything that would stand up in court yet. "That was then, this is now. Times change," Blair answered flippantly.

Stag growled at the statement and slowly Blair rose to his feet looking at Stag. The man was almost as tall as Jim and probably had 30 pounds on Blair as he took another step closer. Forcing himself to keep loose, Blair watched Stag's arm tense inside his pocket. "You're filth," he growled, "corrupting others."

Blair debated his answer and then smiled. "Yeah, so?"

"You're polluting my fishing area," Stag snarled and pulled his hand free from his pocket, a large bowie knife in his right hand. He swung it in a wide arc looking at Blair and Blair, having seen first-hand the damage the knife could do, took another step back.

"Hey man, put the knife down," Blair stated holding up his hands before reaching behind him where he had his holster. "You don't want to do this."

"You're disgusting," Stag continued, "corrupting innocent people."

"Is that why you killed the others and carved an S&G into their chests?" Blair asked his hand pulling his gun free from his holster.

"They were corrupt, just like you." Ben Stag moved closer and Blair stepped back feeling the water splash against the heels of his shoes as Stag brandished the knife. From his peripheral vision Blair could see Jim emerging from the trees as H and Rafe moved out of the trees to his right and left.

"But you enjoyed it didn't you, especially when George Myers gave you a blowjob?" Blair pushed.

"He was evil, he needed to die," Stag screamed and lunged, the knife held in front of him. Blair jumped back swinging his gun around but even as he pointed it Jim, who had heard the confession, ran down the beach and tackled him from the side, bringing Stag down into the water, his weight holding Stag as Blair handed him a set of handcuffs.

"You got the confession on tape," Blair asked and Jim nodded as he pulled Stag up.

"You're under arrest," he began as Detectives Brown and Rafe caught up to them, Connor following. Grabbing a glove, Rafe reached down and picked up the knife bagging it before the water could wash off evidence as Brown read the man his rights.

Back at the station, Blair and Jim filled out their reports and met with the DA while Simon called the Commissioner to let him know the case was closed. Finishing up, they went out to a local watering hole with Brown, Rafe, Joel Taggart, the Captain of the Bomb Squad, and Connor to celebrate and Blair realized he didn't feel like an outsider; he was being accepted as one of the members Major Crimes.

An hour later, sitting in the bar, the small group looked up as Simon joined them. "This round is on me," he announced as he took a seat. "The mayor is happy." He glanced around at his small core group and its new edition, "and Stag confessed to all the murders in exchange for the DA taking the death penalty off the table. So let's lift a glass to Jim and Blair," he looked over at the newcomer, "our youngest team member."

Blair wasn't sure he liked being called the youngest team member but decided it was better than kid as he lifted his own beer.

As the small group celebrated, they asked Blair many questions, heard about how he ended up in the academy and finally asked how he ended up in Major Crimes. It was obvious to all that Blair was shocked when Simon told him that the order had come down from the Commissioner.

"I don't know the Commissioner," he stated with a shrug. "Maybe Naomi does."

"Who's Naomi," Jim asked, looking over at his partner.

"My mom. She's an original flower child, never settling down anywhere. She hated the fact that I was a beat cop. Hell, she hated that I was a cop. She used to be a protester."

"Doesn't sound like she would know the Commissioner," Joel ventured and Blair shook his head.

"I'm sometimes amazed at who Naomi knows. She seems to have connections everywhere," Blair shook his head.

The conversation moved on and the group spent a couple of hours talking about cases. They even filled Blair in on a few of his partner's "idiosyncrasies." Most of the things they mentioned Blair realized were things a sentinel would need in a hostile environment such as: a clean well-organized workspace, scent-free products and cleansers used both by the Major Crimes staff to clean their desks and by the cleaning crew on the Major Crimes floor, a corner desk where he could observe the whole room, and a computer screen with low lighting for sensitive eyes. Understanding the implications and making a mental note of these quirks and planning on adding them to his growing file, Blair wondered, not for the first time, how Jim had managed without a guide.

### \*\*\*The Dissertation One Year Later

Sitting in what passed for a living room in the large warehouse Blair rented and called a home, Blair looked over his calendar amazed at how fast time had passed. It was one year ago to the day that he had transferred into Major Crimes. Partnered with Jim Ellison, he had learned how to be a true detective, really internalizing the words "to serve and protect." The year had been an amazing roller coaster ride and the pair had quickly learned how to complement each other as they ran investigations. And their record of success was adding up impressively. In the year they had been partnered they had caught two serial killers, Ben Stag and David Lash, a rogue CIA agent planning on releasing Ebola on Cascade, Lee Brackett, a serial bomber, Veronica Saris, a gun runner, Hector Carasco, and an assassin, Tommy Juno.

Through all the investigations, Blair had been Jim's partner and, even more importantly, Jim's guide. He had learned so much from his partner about being a cop and had learned even more about what it means to be a sentinel and yet, the scales had truly been balanced since he had to teach and help Jim to survive with heightened senses. Blair was awed and honored by the fact that he was the companion or guide to a sentinel.

Of course, the inner core of Major Crimes knew about Jim's senses. Simon had insisted that they be told since they often worked with Jim. The small group had found the idea of heightened senses weird, but had very quickly learned to ask Jim to look over things for them. Jim always obliged.

And on top of everything else, Blair was on the fast track to getting his doctorate. As soon as he realized what Jim was, Blair had changed his doctorate to his true love, sentinels and had been working feverishly on the dissertation ever since. When he needed down time from writing the dissertation he would actually write stories, loosely based on some of their cases, about a sentinel cop and his partner guide and he sometimes daydreamed about publishing the stories. But whether writing the scientific dissertation or the short stories Blair as always focused on the sentinel.

Blair's big question was what to do when he finished and received his doctorate. He didn't want to give up being Jim's partner but some part of him still felt the call to travel and wanted to explore cultures. And finally, he knew deep in his heart that working with Jim was becoming torture. He was in love with the man though he would never admit that to Jim. But, at night in the privacy of his own home, he relived their first case as a fantasy, the difference being Jim's fly was open and he was a willing participant instead of staging a sting operation.

Shaking his head with a sigh, Blair went back to the dissertation open on his laptop adding, "Humanity has long dug into its past in the hope that it will shed light on its future. Perhaps what this reveals is that it is the best of ourselves that will survive and lead us through the next millennium. Watching our every step will be our tribal protectors -- the sentinels -- and their insight will further illuminate the spiritual connection of all things."

Smiling at this final summation, he added "THE END," and sat back looking at the first draft. It needed work, Blair would need to take Jim's name out of the document, touch up a few things, but it was done. He would soon turn it into his dissertation committee and then make some decisions about life. Maybe, he could take a leave from the PD, Megan or Joel could back up Jim while he was gone.

He was just reaching to close the program when a hand squeezed his shoulder. Spinning round he looked at his mother. "Mom, I didn't hear you come in," he stood and hugged her.

"Well, Sweetie, I called and left a message last night."

"Oh, I guess I didn't look over my messages. I was busy working on my dissertation."

"Is that it? Is it finished," Naomi leaned over to look at the document.

"It's only a first draft, it needs work."

"Can I read it?"

"No, it's not ready yet." Blair said hastily and then smiled closing the computer and changing the topic. "If I'd known you were coming I'd have made other plans but I have to meet Jim."

"That's quite alright. I'll see you later." Naomi kissed her son's cheek and turned to the kitchen to make tea as Blair grabbed his jacket and headed out the door.

Naomi smiled as Blair disappeared. She was so proud of him, finishing his dissertation. She was sure what Blair had written would be excellent. He was always criticizing his own work. Sighing she looked at the computer. The sooner he finished his PhD the sooner he'd leave the police force. Maybe, if he had a little help he might finish faster. Agreeing with herself and picking up the phone she dialed her publisher friend, Sid Graham, in New York.

### \*\*\*Media

It only took three days for the shit to hit the fan when Sid Graham read and, without any authorization but Naomi's promise that she would get Blair to sign a contract, released excerpts from Blair's manuscript.

Three days that would change Blair and Jim's lives forever.

Three days that Blair tried unsuccessfully to halt his mother's interference and to squelch the publicity and publication of his dissertation before he realized that the genie had truly and permanently been let out of the bottle and he had no control over the rising media frenzy. It was during those three days that Blair learned Naomi and Sid had gotten him his position in Major Crimes and that his mother and Sid had been more than casual acquaintances. He also learned that she had given the go ahead for Sid to release some excerpts, not knowing Jim's name would be all over them.

Three days of joyful celebration and boasting by Naomi and of disappointment and long silences from his best friend before Jim told him to "go for the brass ring" and walked away trying to continue his life and work as a cop. Three days before Blair decided the only way to take back any control was to, in fact, give in. And so with mixed feelings of joy and sorrow, the sorrow from knowing he had been too careless with Jim's life and Jim was paying a price he shouldn't have to, Blair tendered his resignation to the PD and signed a contract for three million dollars for the publishing of "The Sentinel by Blair Sandburg."

The publicity around the piece was incredible! No one could get enough of the sentinel. Paparazzi were buzzing around Blair, snapping pictures and trying to get sound bytes. Television stations were offering large sums of money for interviews. And Blair, in conjunction with the official release of his dissertation, released some of the collection of short stories he had written. The book was titled "The Sentinel's Secret" and hit number one on the best seller's list within two weeks.

Blair was a scientific and literary star and the darling anthropologist of Rainier. It didn't hurt any that he was both young and handsome. Offers were coming from every direction for tours and lectures both in anthropology and literary circles. Most asked if there were some way he could entice Jim Ellison to join him for interviews and show some of the things a sentinel could do. Blair dismissed these requests immediately telling those who asked that Jim was not some trained seal but there was little he could do to stop the media from trying to get at Jim. In addition to stalking Jim both at home and on the job, the media were calling his father and

brother to ask what it was like to live with a freak. They called his ex-wife Carolyn who told them in no uncertain terms to go to hell and not to bother her again. They tried to interview other members of Major Crimes but the brothers in blue closed ranks to protect one of their own.

Jim had been both angry and embarrassed by what Blair had written about him. The dissertation made Jim sound like some kind of mentally unbalanced goofball comic book hero. It was one thing for his best friend to say in private he had a "fear of intimacy" and was "territorially threatened to the point of paranoia," but it was another thing to tell that to the world. But despite the pain and embarrassment, ultimately Jim had forgiven Blair for his role in letting the secret out. He understood that it had been done with the best of intentions by Naomi but as a result Jim had needed to withdraw and isolate himself from the limelight, and that had meant distancing himself from Blair to keep the media away. The distancing was made easier when Blair left the PD to concentrate on his new career. So, as Blair launched his career doing interviews and talking about sentinels and people with enhanced senses such as "noses" in the perfume industry and wine tasters and how to support them, Jim put his career on hold taking a quiet leave of absence until the media uproar died down and he could go about his job.

While he was on leave Internal Affairs interviewed Jim and went over every case he had worked but there were no repercussions. Jim denied that anyone besides himself and Blair knew about his senses, covering for Simon and the others as he spoke with IA, the Commissioner and finally the Chief of Police and Cascade's Chief District Attorney. When the report came out from IA, it was determined that Jim had used his senses and brain just as any other good detective would and all the arrests were based on solid, hard evidence. He was reinstated and as the uproar over his senses had finally started to settle down Jim returned to work. It had been two long months of waiting to hear about his job while hiding from the media and Blair but when the report came down Jim returned with the stipulation that he continue to work in Major Crimes. The mayor had wanted to pull him for "special services" hoping to get some publicity out of the sentinel phenomenon but Jim had refused. He gave the Mayor an ultimatum, let him do the job he was meant to do or he would leave and do it somewhere else. Rather than lose the detective, the Mayor agreed and Jim settled back into his role.

While Jim spent two months in hiding, Blair spent the two months talking about his favorite subject, sentinels, and their roles as guardians. He would talk about how great Jim was and what amazing things he could do, but he refused to discuss the psychological profile of Jim he created for the dissertation. In particular he enjoyed discussing his research and the role both a shaman and a guide played in a sentinel's life. He even discussed the possibility of going back out into the field to do more research. He had seen references to the fact that there was a spiritual plane that a sentinel walked and wanted to learn more about it. He loved talking about all things sentinel and felt he had everything he wanted out of life with one exception; with all the interviews he wasn't at Jim's side and he hadn't really had more than a few passing words with Jim since the story broke.

Hopping on a plane to New York City, Naomi at his side, he glanced back at Cascade, some part of him wishing for a return to the quieter life he had lived before the media hype as he headed for a publishing meeting with Sid Graham.

There was a limo waiting at the airport and Blair and Naomi were bundled into it and brought to a hotel in midtown where a two-bedroom suite had been reserved. One night in the hotel suite cost almost as much as Blair earned in a month as a detective and for the first time it really hit Blair; he had money. Smiling at his mother as they looked around the large living room, he opened the bottle of champagne left on ice in the suite when they arrived and toasted her.

"I'll call Sid and tell him we're here," Naomi said, accepting a chilled glass.

Blair nodded looking around at the expensive room. He wished Jim were here to see this. "Find out where we should meet him for dinner," Blair turned back to Naomi.

"Blair, Sweetie, is something wrong? You sound distracted. Should I cancel dinner?"

"No Ma. I was just lost in thought. Tell Sid we'll meet with him this evening."

Naomi nodded and disappeared into one of the bedrooms and Blair wandered the room before going to look out the window. From the window he could see Central Park and he considered going and taking a walk there but stopped himself. He had to meet with Sid Graham about his new book. He just needed to pull himself out of this funk. His second book of short stories, the last of the collection he had written while working at Jim's side, was with him. He would give it to Sid Graham tomorrow and then? And then what? He didn't know. He had been asked to give a lecture up at Columbia but he hadn't accepted any lately. All the lights, the fanfare, it was fun for a while but what good was it really? All it had done was keep him away from his sentinel. Turning away from the window, he sipped at the expensive champagne as Naomi came back into the room. "Sid made reservations at the restaurant down stairs," she informed him. "We'll meet him for dinner there."

Blair nodded. "I guess I'll take a shower and get dressed," he turned to go and Naomi stopped him.

"Blair, are you alright?"

Blair smiled at the concern and nodded but he wasn't alright. He was in love and the person he was in love with was three thousand miles away and needed to be removed from him until he finished all the media crap. Blair suspected that his unconscious desire to be with Jim had taken hold and that was why he had turned down any more interviews.

Naomi watched him walk off and then smiled. She and Sid had a treat for Blair and she was sure it would improve his mood. He had been a bit melancholy since this business started, more concerned about Jim than anything else. Well, it was time to get Blair back in the saddle. Going into her room, she got ready for the dinner with Sid.



The hotel restaurant gleamed with polished silver and crystal as Blair and Naomi were quietly ushered to their table, Sid there waiting. He rose to meet them, shaking Blair's hand and giving Naomi a kiss on the cheek and then ordering a bottle of wine before sitting down. Once the drinks were served and the food ordered, he winked at Naomi.

"Sweetie, we have some good news for you," she said with a smile, a hand reaching out to hold Blair's. Blair raised an eyebrow and she continued with a smile for Sid. "One of Sid's clients at UCLA is going up into the Andes for a six-month study of an area where he thinks the Incans had a small settlement and he's offered you a place on his team."

Blair's eyes opened wide. "Mom, that would be," he paused. "But what about the book?"

Sid nodded, ready for the question. "We are just about ready for production so all we really have to do is get it out. There's not much else to do. It will practically sell itself. Since you'll be pretty much incommunicado, if you give your mother power of attorney to deal with the financial matters while you are gone, she can make the arrangements with me," Sid answered.

"Wow, I mean, I've got to tell," he paused. Jim wasn't here he reminded himself. But this might just settle the whole media issue. He'd be out of the public eye and when he came back he'd go to Cascade and Jim. A real smile lighting his face for the first time in a while, Blair nodded. "When do I leave?"

### \*\*\*While the Cat's Away

Jim wasn't home when Blair called from New York to tell him the news and though Blair left him an excited message, he also emailed him the news. Jim read it through and then did what he normally did; he deleted the message and went back to work. He knew Blair would be happy going back into the field and he was happy for his friend. He just hoped things would finally settle while Blair was gone.

In the bullpen, the Major Crimes team all had received emailed goodbyes from Blair and though on the one hand they were happy for him, on the other they felt like he had abandoned his sentinel. They all watched Jim with concern. He had been through a lot and it had taken a toll. Though the Ellison temper didn't show any more than usual, he rarely smiled and he never went out with the team after work. For that they couldn't blame Jim. The one time he had agreed to go for a drink, they ended up in a small bar where a reporter recognized Jim and harassed him about what cases he was working on until Simon threatened to arrest the reporter for stalking.

Jim knew the Major Crimes detectives were not entirely happy with Blair, but he defended his friend. He told the team that Blair had helped him with his senses and if other things had gotten out of control, it wasn't Blair's fault. So, Jim kept his head down and did his work as three thousand miles away a storm brewed...

Sid Graham had finished reading the next book in the series. It would definitely be a best seller but he wanted to get as much publicity going as possible and maybe get a product line out to add more profits. He had read through the story and at one point in the tale a dog whistle had distracted the sentinel and he had almost lost the criminal because of it. What if he took the dog whistle idea and turned it into "A Sentinel Whistle – A Sure Fire Way to Get a Sentinel's Attention." If he packaged it that way, he could turn a cheap whistle into a gold mine; the company could make another fortune. Smiling at all the zeros he saw flashing before his eyes, he called down to Marketing for a meeting.



In Cascade, unaware of the brewing problem a continent away, Jim, Joel and Megan caught a church bomber. Though Jim tried to stay out of the media, the high profile case once again put him in the spotlight and the buzzards swarmed, again.

Intent on getting background info, one reporter started following William Ellison all over Cascade. Worked up by the ongoing harassment and trying to stay out of the media, William ran to his car from his country club and in the parking lot suffered a massive heart attack. An ambulance was immediately dispatched, but William Ellison never made it to the hospital. Arriving at Cascade General with Simon who had driven him there, Jim was shown to the emergency room where his father's body had been placed. He waited there for his brother Steven, who walked in and after looking at his father turned and smashed a fist into his older brother's face. "This is your fault, you freak," he shouted hysterically.

Jim flinched more at the accusation than the punch swelling his jaw as Simon grabbed the younger Ellison. "Are you out of mind," he bellowed, but Jim shook his head.

"Leave him, Simon," Jim whispered. "He's right."

"The Hell he is," Simon protested but he loosened his hold. Jim turned rubbing his chin as he looked at Steven Ellison. Simon knew he would never forget the expression he saw on Jim's face and silently cursed Blair Sandburg as Jim straightened, the epitome of a perfect soldier.

"I'll make the funeral arrangements and let you know where and when," he said in a flat, emotionless voice. Reaching down, Jim touched his father's hand, his face softening for one brief moment and then without another word turned and walked out of the room, Simon following.

Both Simon and Joel called Naomi trying to reach Blair to let him know what was going on but Naomi, knowing Blair could never make it back in time for the funeral didn't contact her son. Instead, she sent flowers, "From the Sandburgs," thinking this was for the best.

At the wake Steven Ellison and his friends snubbed Jim, many offering little more than a polite nod to the older Ellison. And though Jim noticed, he said nothing. He had his own friends to be with. He had many friends in the PD and so it was no surprise that a lot of uniformed officers came by to offer condolences either right after patrol or right before patrol. And all of Major Crimes made an appearance, several grumbling about Blair not being there but Jim defended his partner. "He's out of reach in the Andes," he told the group as he stood at the back of the room, the smell of flowers a bit overpowering. Joel or Megan stood by him at all times, a hand on his arm to help ground him, but both wished Blair were here, thinking Jim needed his true guide.

It was a long day but the PD took care of their own, stationing guards outside of the parlor to ensure that no reporters were allowed in. By the end of the day Jim had a fierce migraine as he went home preparing for the funeral the next day.

The day of the funeral Steven gave Jim the cold shoulder, taking a separate limo to the cemetery. At the grave site, as the priest said a prayer, he glared at Jim and after the funeral, when they went back to William's house, the gathered mourners watched Steven address everyone but Jim. Megan kept muttering about the rude behavior but Jim told her to keep quiet. He didn't need the added tension of another confrontation with his baby brother. Though Megan didn't agree with Jim that keeping quiet while being treated rudely was the right thing to do, she kept her peace, staying close to Jim to support him.



Two days later both brothers and Sally were summoned to a lawyer's office where their father's lawyer, Mr. Richmond, read out the will.

Though the brothers were told they owned equal shares of the house where they grew up, William left a request that it remain untouched as long as Sally lived there. Both brothers agreed and an account was set up to pay the taxes and maintenance. William's stock portfolio was to be divided evenly between Jim and Steven, each inheriting approximately a half million in stocks and bonds. Additionally, there was some money in trust left for Steven that totaled another half a million. And finally, the cabin out in the wilds was to be given to Jim. Steven looked up ready to protest as the lawyer read this last piece. But William had added in the will that he left Steven the money and Jim the cabin, as Jim had been the only one to ever use it.

Assets divided, the lawyer handed each man a copy of the will and some paperwork. Thanking Mr. Richmond the brothers went their separate ways, Jim sadly watching Steven walk off. They hadn't been friends in years, but now, it seemed to Jim, they were enemies.

Once home, Jim grabbed a cold beer and collapsed onto the couch, the tension in his back and neck painful. He ran the cold bottle across his forehead and sighed before turning to listen to his messages. The first was from Simon offering support and Jim gave a sad smile acknowledging that Simon was a good friend. The second was from a reporter asking if he wanted to make a statement about the Berkshire Publishing's new sentinel marketing line.

Jim frowned not knowing what the man was talking about and called Naomi. He couldn't get hold of her and so he called the reporter and the man chuckled. "The Sentinel Whistle," he explained and suggested Jim look it up. Jim did and was horrified. Berkshire Publishing had put out a line of dog whistles for getting Jim's attention. Hanging up the phone, he again tried to reach Naomi this time a lot more forcefully, but Jim suspected Naomi was avoiding talking to him. Failing at reaching her, Jim had tried to track down Blair and when that didn't work; he finally called Sid Graham at Berkshire Publishing, demanding that he pull the line. Graham offered him ten thousand dollars as a nuisance payment saying he had already sold five thousand in Cascade on the first day of sales and they were making a two hundred percent profit on each whistle. Jim's next call was to his father's lawyer who very quickly went to court to put an injunction on the manufacture and sale. But the damage was done. Despite the fact that the lawyers were still battling the case enough whistles had been sold that Jim couldn't walk down a street of Cascade without painful whistles assailing him.

Not able to take to the streets and run an investigation, after two weeks of hiding out in the PD, Jim knew his career was over and put in for early retirement. He had been in the service for ten years and had spent another seven at the PD and so, based on the extraordinary circumstances, he was granted his retirement request. He would get a fixed income but it was enough and he had the stocks and bonds to fall back on if needed.

After meeting with Simon, Jim sat with the people from Major Crimes and told them his decision. He just couldn't stay in Cascade any longer. If he had trouble in public before, now he had become a prisoner in his own home. Giving his notice, Jim made arrangements to leave Cascade before finally, reluctantly, going to work to clean out his desk.

Walking in, boxes in hand, Jim glanced across the bullpen at H and Rafe, their heads together whispering and once in a while casting furtive glances at him, as he packed his personal items leaving only a few files and a collection of pens and paperclips behind. If he wanted to he could hear what they were saying but he didn't want to, he just didn't have the heart to listen to their pitying comments. He just wanted to get this over with as quickly as he could and leave. Reaching down Jim picked up the one-framed picture that had adorned his desk. It was a picture of the Major Crimes Squad. He and Simon stood as two tall columns on the left and right sides, H and Rafe beside them and Joel, Megan, Blair and Rhonda in the center. Rhonda had framed the picture for him as a birthday present. Sighing, Jim ran a finger across the smiling faces in the picture before he carefully placed it with his other things.

As he put the last of his things in the small box he had brought from home he smiled at the detectives even as he straightened his back. This was going to be hard and he would need to clamp down on his emotions if he didn't want to breakdown in tears in front of his friends.

H and Rafe, seeing Jim was done, both stood and walked over to Jim as Megan, realizing this was going to be good bye, joined them.

"I hate the fact that you're leaving, man," Rafe said softly as Megan nodded, tears brightening her eyes. "This is so wrong."

Jim shrugged. "I can't stay, not the way things are going." He looked across the bullpen with another sigh, committing to memory the layout, the sounds, the smells. If he could ever call any place beside the loft home, this was the place. For a moment he let himself reminisce over happier times. Blair had been at his side then and no one had ever heard of sentinels. Now, Blair was off somewhere in the Andes and dog whistles were attacking him.

"We'll be at the loft Friday to help you pack, man. Simon and Joel are bringing the food, Rafe and I are getting the beer, and Conner's getting the dessert." Jim nodded forcing a smile and stuck out his hand. He reached for it first and taking a tight hold pulled Jim in for a hug holding him tight. "I love you man," he whispered before releasing him. Rafe and Megan followed Brown each hugging Jim, Megan's tears wetting his shirt.

"Don't be a stranger," H warned. "Once you're settled let us know where you end up." Jim agreed lifting the box and letting his eyes linger momentarily on his desk before turning toward the elevator.

Friday, promptly at six o'clock, the team from Major Crimes arrived, food and libations in hand. Even Rhonda and her husband showed up to help pack Jim's loft. For a couple hours, they worked and reminisced over the time they had spent together as they carted things down to storage and covered what was not being moved. By the time they had finished it was after ten and slowly but surely they each said their goodbyes, most tearful, all promising to keep in touch. Joel and his wife were almost the last to leave and finally only Jim and Simon were left.

"I'll come in the morning," Simon said as he picked up his jacket, "to see you off."

"You don't have to Simon," Jim answered but the Captain shook his head knowing he would be there at sun up to wave goodbye. Jim smiled sadly and the pair parted, Simon heading home.

Looking around the loft, Jim shook his head sadly and moved to the bedroom. On the dresser was a picture of him and Blair fishing. It was when he had taught Blair fly fishing. Simon had captured the picture of them smiling as they looked at the fish they had caught. He looked at the picture and then finally put the picture down and turning headed down curling up on the couch to sleep.



In the morning, with Simon waving, he left his life and drove away. His last words, "Don't tell Blair where I am. Our lives have separated and I want to keep it that way."

Simon had nodded his understanding, promising to tell the others not to forward information and stood watching the truck until it finally disappeared in the distance.

### \*\*\*The Return Home

Blair bounced off the plane from Lima Peru and made his way through Customs arriving in Los Angeles on the second leg of his journey home. Waiting in the airport was Naomi and he hugged her, talking a mile a minute about the expedition as he headed out of the airport. Naomi couldn't help but smile, listening to Blair as he talked about the wonderful experience of working with the team in the Andes. Hailing a cab, she directed them to a hotel where they would stay the night before meeting with Sid Graham in the morning. After that, Blair had every intention of heading to Cascade and seeing Jim. Since getting to Lima yesterday, he had left Jim three messages that he'd be home within a couple of days. He was a little surprised that Jim hadn't called him back.

"Have you heard from Jim?" he asked his mother as they climbed into the cab and Naomi had winced. She hadn't spoken to Jim since the death of his father, which she knew was inexcusable but she was honestly embarrassed that she had only sent flowers and didn't make an

appearance at the wake or funeral. She had been at a retreat and left Sid Graham to handle "the sentinel stuff." After she heard about the dog whistles, she couldn't face Jim.

"No, dear," she said. "But I do have some bad news. His father passed away."

"When? Why didn't you contact me?"

"Darling there was nothing you could do. You would never make it back in time for the funeral."

"Except be there to help Jim," Blair answered. "He's my best friend. I should have been there for him."

"I'm sure the other pi...police officers were there for Jim," she answered softly and Blair nodded.

"Naomi, I'm going to change my plans. I'll leave right after the meeting with Sid Graham and head to Cascade."

Naomi nodded her understanding, noting how Blair's attitude had taken a nosedive. Wondering if perhaps she should have tried to contact Blair, she walked into the hotel and they checked in before going to dinner.

At dinner, Blair regained some of his excitement as he talked about his work in the Andes and the research. The dinner went well into the night and Blair, who had planned on calling Jim, realized it was way too late to get hold of him. He decided he would call in the morning before Jim left for work but he had been exhausted from all the traveling and overslept missing the opportunity. Because he woke late the next morning, Blair rushed through showering and shaving before hailing a cab to the meeting. Arriving at 8:55 for a nine o'clock meeting at Berkshire's Los Angeles office, he accepted a cup of coffee and took a seat in the conference room. A few minutes later, Sid Graham walked in.

"How was the expedition?" he asked as he shook Blair's hand and took a seat.

Blair smiled, "It was wonderful."

"Good," Sid answered. "So, now we can get back to work. I've had offers for a movie based on the sentinel and I thought we should discuss it."

"No," Blair answered. "I am not putting Jim's life on display like that."

Sid sighed knowing they were missing a golden opportunity but this was not the first time he had made the suggestion and had it vetoed. "Okay, let's discuss your next book."

"My next book," Blair paused. "I've started but it's nowhere near done."

"How long until you finish it? Could we have it ready for Christmas release?"



Blair considered the question. "I'm not sure. I'll have to get back to you. Let me get settled and I'll discuss it with you next week."

Sid nodded and the pair went on to discuss book sales. Sid wanted Blair to do a book signing but Blair shook his head. "I need a little downtime man. I haven't even been home yet."

Graham nodded and the pair agreed to meet the following week after Blair had a chance to settle back in Cascade. He made a brief stop at his home, to drop off his things, then since it was close to three went to the PD to see Jim. Excited and happy, he entered and made his way up to Major Crimes. Entering the bullpen, his eyes went immediately to Jim's desk but someone new was sitting there. Frowning, he turned surveying the room to see what other changes might have happened in the last few months but aside from someone sitting at Jim's desk, there didn't seem to be any changes in the layout. Seeing Brown and Rafe, he walked over to their desks. "Hi Guys," he started but his voice died as he looked at the cold stares of the two men. "I...I...just got back and was looking for Jim."

Both men stood and stared at Blair, anger clear in their gazes. "You won't find him here so why don't you go back to your university and leave us alone."

"What-" Blair started but then stopped as Simon came to the door and looked over at him.

"What do you want Sandburg?" Simon snarled.

"I just got back. I wanted to see Jim," he said, realizing something was very wrong, his voice shaking a little as his stomach began to churn.

"You won't find him here," Megan said angrily and Blair turned to stare at the Australian Inspector. She had walked in with Joel.

"I don't understand, what's going on, where's Jim?"

"Look Sandburg, this is a place of business, not some social setting where you can get plots for your books," Simon said with a nod to the other detectives. They all turned back to their work and Blair looked around in shock realizing he was getting the silent treatment from his friends. Finally, he turned to leave but then looked back at Joel, pleadingly.

Joel sighed and turned to Megan. "I'm going to get a breath of fresh air," he said quietly and walked out of the bullpen, saying nothing to Blair. Getting in the elevator, he held up his hand as Blair started to ask a question. "Wait 'till we're outside," he ordered and Blair nodded numbly.



They went to a small coffee shop two blocks from the PD and sat in a back booth, Joel ordering coffee and Blair tea before Joel leaned forward. "Jim's gone," he stated softly. "He retired."

"Why?" Blair asked softly, fear evident in his voice, and Joel looked over him. "Please, Joel, I've been out of touch for six months."

"Your publisher started another ad campaign," he said with disgust. "Again, the damn reporters started up bothering Jim and his family. Only this time something happened. Jim's father suffered a fatal heart attack while trying to get away from the reporters. Jim's brother blamed him for what happened and while Jim was dealing with that and the funeral, the publisher put out a line of sentinel whistles. They were dog whistles, Blair," Joel said angrily. "But of course Jim could hear them. It got to the point that Jim couldn't walk down the street anymore without people blowing them and hurting his ears."

"Oh God, I didn't know, Joel," Blair's heart wrenched. "I would never have allowed it."

Joel nodded, he had been sure Blair hadn't condoned what happened but he was still responsible. He had let the publisher loose on Jim. "He had to retire. He couldn't stay in Cascade. He tried to get hold of both you and Naomi to stop the whistles and finally took the publishers to court but it was already too late." Joel sighed and finished his coffee, rising and throwing some money down on the table, before looking at Blair's face. Despite a healthy tan from living six months in the jungle, Blair was pale, his face stricken with horror. "You know when his father died and you didn't turn up, we complained but Jim defended you. But after

the whistles," he shook his head, not finishing. There really was nothing else to say. Turning, he walked out of the coffee shop.

Going home, feeling numb with shock, Blair called Naomi and Sid Graham. Both were still in LA and he told them he'd be there for a meeting with them that evening. Packing an overnight bag, he called the airport and booked a flight before logging into his computer and reading every article he could find about the sentinel whistles. Finishing, heartsick, he headed to LA, and a meeting with his publisher and mother.

### \*\*\*Meeting 1

Naomi and Sid arrived at Blair's hotel together and made their way up to his room. Knocking they waited a moment until Blair opened the door and ushered them in, his face set.

"Hello Sweetie," Naomi said with a smile but then stopped at the look on Blair's face. "What's wrong?"

"I went to Cascade to see Jim. Did you know he retired?"

Naomi shook her head no as Sid answered. "I don't know why you'd need to call us to a meeting to tell us this. You could have told us this over the phone."

"He retired because of the Sentinel Whistles," Blair whispered to keep from screaming and Graham shrugged.

"We could have made a fortune on those whistles," Sid Graham began, "but no, Ellison's lawyer put a stop to it. You think you can get the injunction lifted? Maybe, if we put his face on the packaging we could garner more sales," he added hopefully.

Blair shook his head angrily. "I want the whole idea squashed." He turned to Naomi. "How could you approve it? Didn't you stop to think what it would do to Jim? He retired because he can't even walk down the streets of Cascade anymore." Blair's voice had risen to near hysteria and Naomi reached out for him but Blair pulled free. "How could you do this to him, Naomi?"

"Darling, I didn't realize what the whistles would do. I would never do anything to hurt Jim, you must know that. But think of the positive effect Blair, he's no longer a pig, he's safer, if anything it's protected him."

"Protected," the hysteria in Blair's voice went up a notch as he stared at his mother in disbelief. "He's a sentinel, he's hard wired to protect his tribe, it's what he does, who he is and what have we done? We've evicted him from his tribe. Oh God!" Blair turned and paced to the other side of the room, his hands brushing through his hair, before turning to look at the publisher. He couldn't deal with Naomi or Sid right now. He needed to find and make restitution to Jim. Then, maybe, he and Jim could work out a way to fix the mess. "How much money have I made on this sentinel thing?" he demanded angrily.

Graham, not understanding the switch in conversation, shrugged. "I'd guess about eight million. Your accountants could give you a better figure but I'm probably close."



Blair nodded. "Half of that money needs to be given to Jim. He was the other half of this venture, he is the one most impacted by it. I should have given him control and the money from the start." He shook his head at Graham's shocked face, holding up a warning hand. "Not a word," he demanded knowing Graham would never understand his need to share profits with Jim. "I'm going back to Cascade to see what I can salvage from our friendship. I want the paperwork for transferring the money tomorrow along with half the rights to all profits from any publications related to the sentinel. I'm going to find Jim and see how I can fix this." Turning to Naomi, he looked at her sad face. "Mom, I know you didn't understand the impact, but you have to realize, by giving you two control of things since this started, I've destroyed the most precious thing in my life and probably destroyed the last functioning sentinel in the industrial world. And I thought of myself as a guide," he added bitterly, self-disgust evident. Turning, he grabbed his bag. He could hear Naomi sob but he never turned as he walked out.

### \*\*\*Meeting 2

Blair knew why he wouldn't be welcomed when he walked into Major Crimes the next afternoon. They all blamed him for what happened to Jim and they were right in their blame. But if he was ever going to make things right he would have to face them. Walking into the

bullpen he looked around, noticing Megan's angry stare before making his way to Simon's door, where even Rhonda gave him a cold shoulder.

Knocking on the slightly open door, Blair walked in and stood respectfully, acknowledging that he was no longer Simon's friend. Simon looked up. "What do you want, Sandburg?"

"I need to see Jim. Can you tell me where I can find him?"

Simon looked over the man. "Jim's last words to me were, 'Don't tell Blair where I am. Our lives have separated and I want to keep it that way.' So, you can go to hell."

Blair swallowed the lump that suddenly appeared in his throat as he nodded. "I understand where you are coming from," Blair agreed, his voice hoarse. "But I have to see Jim. I was out of touch. I didn't know what was happening. I need to make this right."

It was a heartfelt plea. Simon recognized that fact but all that would happen if Blair entered Jim's life again would be more pain and so he shook his head. "It was his request, Sandburg," he answered, though his voice had softened. "I can't do that to him. He's had too much betrayal in his life. And before you say you didn't know," Simon held up his hand, "you are ultimately responsible for what went down."

Blair nodded his understanding and agreement. "Can you give him my phone number? And...and ask him to call me?"

"I'll give it to him," Simon took the number and Blair turned and left.

### \*\*\*Meeting 3

Blair waited three days, making sure his phone was charged and with him at all times, in the hopes that Jim would call. But Jim didn't and when he called Simon, the Major Crimes Captain confirmed that he had given Jim the number on the day Blair had gone to him.

But after three days he knew Jim wasn't going to call. Sitting in the warehouse, he glanced over the paperwork that would give Jim four million dollars and then back at the phone and decided he would just have to find Jim. After all, he had worked with the best detective in Washington State, so he had learned a few things about how to find someone.

He started with internet searches and then extended the searches to Steven and William and discovered, through real estate records, that William had owned a cabin several hours north of Cascade. Remembering that Jim's senses came online after he spent some time at a cabin, Blair decided it was a good place to start and, packing for a few days, got in his car and headed out.

It was late October and the weather was turning cold, so Jim had a fire going in the hearth when he heard a car pull down the drive. Going to the door he looked out and watched Blair get out of a new BMW and come up the steps, holding a large manila folder. His hair was tied back and he had a healthy looking tan but other than that, Jim didn't see many physical changes in the

last months. However, his style of clothes had changed. They were still casual but these clothes were made of better materials and seemed far more tailored, and conservative. Leaning against the door, arms crossed, Jim watched him walk up.



"Hi Jim," he said softly shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "Can I come in?" Jim didn't answer but opened the door wider letting Blair walk past him.

Blair entered the large living room and glanced around. "Nice," he commented softly as Jim closed the door and walked over to stand by the fire, his eyes on the flames as he reached down to throw another log into the fireplace.

"I used to come up here all the time, so my father left it to me."

Blair winced at the reminder that Jim's father had died.

"I'm sorry about your father. I only heard when I got back. And I heard how he died. Man, I don't even know what to say. I am so sorry."

Jim glanced at Blair and then back at the fire. "He never told me he had a heart condition. I found out after he died."

Blair shook his head sadly looking around the room. It really was a comfortable space with all the amenities. A great place for a retreat or vacation but he didn't think anyone should live here alone. "How long are you planning to stay here before you come back to Cascade?"

"I'm not coming back."

"Are you moving somewhere?"

"No, I'm staying here."

"Jim, you can't live up here alone." Blair moved closer resting a hand on Jim's arm feeling the tension in the muscles beneath his fingers. "You're a human being. Human beings are social animals. They need companionship."

Jim looked down at the hand that rested on his arm and then back up at Blair before pulling free. "Then you tell me what I should do," he answered angrily. "I can't walk down the street of Cascade without people blowing those damn whistles thanks to your publisher. Do you want to know how painful it is when six people blow them at once?"

Blair closed his eyes momentarily, almost feeling Jim's pain before looking at him. "We can go somewhere else, another city and start a new life," Blair answered softly, not even realizing he was suggesting they be together. "Maybe, even some small town somewhere."

"There can be no we, Chief. Anywhere you go there will be people with whistles or cameras. Anytime, you come out with something new, reporters are going to look for me. Hell, I cut my arm catching a perp right after you left for the Andes and when I went to the hospital for stitches, the doctor tried to pump me full of drugs and run tests on my senses for some pharmaceutical company. It seems my sensitivity makes me a great guinea pig. I can't live like that."

"I'm your guide; I have to be with you."

"I'm not doing anything that requires my senses and I'm not going to do anything that requires my senses, so, you don't need to be with me. And, to tell the truth Sandburg, it's dangerous to have you with me." Jim turned back to the fire, not wanting to see the effect of his words. He knew they were harsh and would hurt Blair, but they were also realistic.

Blair blinked looking up at his sentinel. For the last few months, all he dreamt about was getting back to Jim. He was sure the publicity would have settled and he thought, maybe, if Jim was amenable, their relationship could be more than sentinel and guide and friends. Jim would no longer be his research subject and they could have a physical relationship that would be an expression of all they felt for each other. And Blair was sure Jim loved him, every bit as much as he loved Jim.

"I'm not leaving you here alone."

"Yes, you are. I don't want you here," Jim answered in a cold voice. And then he looked at Blair and saw the tears swimming in large sapphire blue eyes. Steeling himself against the pain this caused both of them, he answered, "I'm sorry but this is the way it has to play out. I can't and I won't deal with anything more about the sentinel."

"This isn't about the sentinel business, this is about us."

"There is no us," Jim answered coldly and turned back to look at the fire. "I think you should leave and not come back."

Anger, building at what was being tossed away, Blair turned and looked around the room, not sure what to do, how to make Jim understand what he was giving up. He was trying to think of how to reach Jim when his eyes landed on the folder he had carried in. "I brought something for you," he whispered retrieving the folder and handing it over.

Jim took it and frowned as he looked over the financial information. "What is this?"

"It's the paperwork to set up an account. It's your half of the sentinel money." Jim turned and looked at Blair in shock.

"MY WHAT," he growled.

"It's your half. Once you sign those forms, I'll have my accountants transfer four million to an account for you."

In one swift move, Jim threw them into the fireplace. "Jim, don't," Blair yelled starting to move toward the fire, reaching for the papers, but they were already curling and burning. "Why?" he asked.

Not turning from where he watched the papers burn Jim shook his head. "Get out Sandburg. I don't need or want your money."

"This isn't a pay off," Blair answered. "This was always a partnership."

"Maybe it was once, but it hasn't been for a long time. Consider the partnership dissolved. Now, would you please leave? I don't want reporters finding you here. I've had enough of the media."

There really was nothing else Blair could say. He couldn't force Jim to accept him. Bowing his head, he nodded and turned toward the door.

Outside, Blair stopped and looked up at the cabin. It was beautiful, with all the amenities, but it was so isolated. Jim didn't belong here, certainly not for any long period of time alone. But what could he do?



Turning he climbed into his car as Jim stepped out onto the porch to watch him drive away. Blair did not have sentinel hearing so he did not hear Jim whisper sadly, "Good bye, Chief," as he drove away.

### \*\*\*Meeting 4

Blair didn't know who to turn to for advice. Naomi didn't understand the magnitude of the betrayal that Jim had experienced and only seemed able to focus on Blair's own success, not the cost. Simon and Connor wouldn't speak with him, and his university colleagues, fascinated by the science with a desire to test the sentinel, wouldn't focus on Jim and his predicament.

Sadly, Blair turned his car around and went back to his warehouse home. Looking around, he realized he didn't need to stay in this cold and rat-infested environment any longer. He could afford something better. He could move into the heart of the city and live in a penthouse. There was no joy in the idea. He didn't have Jim to share these things with. Sitting down on the old threadbare coach, Blair glanced around the room. On his desk in the corner was a picture of the Major Crimes team. It had been taken some time ago. Getting up, Blair walked over and picked it up.

Looking over the picture, Blair let his finger trace over his friends. They had been good friends, all willing to tease a bit, but all willing to help. That was until Blair destroyed one of their own. Sadly, Blair went to put the picture on the desk and then stopped looking more closely. Taggart was someone he could call for help. Maybe, Taggart could help him figure out how to fix things.

Grabbing his phone, Blair called the precinct and Joel's personal extension.

Two days later, Joel Taggart was sitting in the same corner booth when Blair walked into the small café shaking rain off his clothes before taking a seat across from the Bomb Squad Captain.

"Hi Joel, um, thanks for meeting with me," Blair stated nervously. "I needed someone to talk to, someone who understands what's going on."

Joel Taggart sighed as thunder rumbled outside and rain pelted the windows of the small diner. "I can't tell you where Jim is. He asked-"

"I found him," Blair cut in as the waitress came to take their orders. "And I went to see him. He wasn't too pleased to see me," he added quietly, pain evident in his voice.

"You had to expect that," Joel answered, but his voice was gentle.

"I know it's just. Damn this is a mess!"

Joel nodded. "Blair, what did you hope to accomplish going to see him?"

"I wanted to stay with him, be with him, make up for what I did. I hadn't thought any further than that. All I could think about when I was on that expedition was getting home to Jim. I was sure all the media hype would be done and we could get on with our lives."

"Define getting on with your lives."

"I thought, maybe, Jim might be..." Blair paused his face turning red.

"That you and Jim might end up lovers?"

Blair nodded and Joel sighed. "There was always speculation about whether you were or not," Joel continued. "Everyone could see there was something special between the two of you and Jim made it clear to all departments that no one was to mess with you. When the sentinel thing came out the rumors stopped because everyone realized what was special between you two." Joel paused as the waitress brought their lunches and then continued. "I know this must hurt, but I doubt Jim could stand having to do one more thing sentinel-related. He's lost everything he cared about because of it and that's why he wants to stay away from you."

"But Jim shouldn't live alone. That's no life."

"I'm afraid he has no choice in the matter. He really can't show his face in public anymore without someone going after him."

"I would be willing to stay with him and forget everything else. None of the stuff matters without him."

Joel looked away from the pleading face, his eyes focusing on the rain outside. He could remember one time Jim had said something to Blair about "puppy dog eyes," and now he could see them. "Blair, you need to wait months until everything is quiet. Then maybe Jim will let you get close. The best advice I can give is keep out of the spotlight."

Blair nodded pushing away his food, untouched. "If that's what it takes," he answered.

### \*\*\*When It Rains

Three days later, the rain was still falling strong and steady in Cascade and the weather was fast becoming a big news item. Up in the mountains north of Cascade, the rain coming down was being called a deluge and residents were being warned about possible flooding.

The weather actually suited Blair; the dreariness matching his mood. He had begun making half-hearted inquiries into other residences knowing he didn't need to live in the warehouse any longer, but he couldn't get excited about it. He seemed to be moving as if only half alive and some part of him knew that he was missing the other half of his soul.

Naomi had tried contacting him a few times but he had let the machine pick up and hadn't returned her calls. He didn't blame his mother for what had happened, he laid the blame

exactly where it should fall, on his shoulders, but he couldn't stand her happy, carefree attitude. So, he felt he needed to avoid her.

Blair was just getting ready to go out. He was meeting a real estate salesman to have another look at condos when Naomi called again. "Blair, sweetheart," her voice sounded strained, "if you are home, turn on the news," she demanded. "And please call me."

Blair frowned and turned on his television, a special bulletin preempting the local shows. Wendy Hawthorne, a newswoman, appeared on the screen standing near a washed out bridge. "I'm standing next to what's left of Northgate Bridge," she began, the camera swinging around to show the rapidly moving turbulent water. "Reports say the bridge was washed out by a flash flood this afternoon. There were some students on the bridge that were swept into the water. Four of them were rescued by Cascade's Sentinel, Jim Ellison, formerly of Major Crimes. According to the survivors, who have been taken to St Mary's Hospital, Sentinel Ellison came down the road and shouted for everyone to get off the bridge. Before all of them could get off, part of the bridge was washed away. Sentinel Ellison dove into the rapidly moving water and pulled four students out." Hawthorne stopped a moment and the camera swung back to her. "Unfortunately, Sentinel Ellison, did not come out. Another rush of water washed him down the rapidly flowing river. Search and Rescue units are out and looking for James Ellison but this bank of the river flows directly into the stormy Pacific. The Coast Guard has also been notified. Live at Northgate with the ongoing search efforts, this is Wendy Hawthorne."

The television scene went back to the news desk where a man repeated the story but Blair was no longer listening. Hands shaking, he reached for his keys, grabbing them and starting for the door. All his thoughts on finding Jim.

Jim's cabin was six hours north of Cascade but Northgate Bridge was only four hours away. What Jim had gone there for, Blair had no idea but he raced off, going as fast as he could in the driving rain, listening to the news, and praying that Jim would be found.

There were still reporters there and Search and Rescue teams when he pulled up.

Recognizing Dr. Blair Sandburg, they let Blair through and he walked up near the foot of the bridge and moved directly to the command center. "Any news of Jim?" he asked and one of the men turned.

"You're the guide, right?" he asked and Blair nodded numbly. The man shook his head. "I'll be honest, it doesn't look good. What with the way the waters running. It's a miracle he got those kids out of the water."

Blair stared wide eyed, not knowing what to say or do as his knees started to tremble and one of the men pushed him down to sit on the back of an ambulance. "Please," he whispered softly to any Deity that would hear. "Please don't let this happen."

Two hours later, the search was called off for the night. It was just too dark to see anything. Blair, standing by the washed-out bridge looked up through the rain wondering what he could do to find Jim as the Search and Rescue teams began packing up. He knew instinctively that tomorrow it would no longer be considered a search and rescue operation but rather a recovery operation.



He was still considering this when Wendy Hawthorne, cameraman in tow, came over. “Dr. Sandburg,” she asked as the cameraman beside her filmed. “I see you are here to support the rescue workers. There are rumors that Jim Ellison severed all ties with you. Would you care to comment?”

Blair took a deep breath and then turned to face the woman. He thought about saying nothing, just walking away, but something in him snapped as he looked at her pseudo sympathetic face. “Jim Ellison did sever all ties with me. He did it because I failed to do my job as an anthropologist and as a guide to protect him. I left him out, swinging in the wind instead of protecting him from the press, from publicity seekers, politicians.” Blair waved his hand encompassing everything. “Furthermore, he was forced to sever all ties with Cascade, and they can’t even understand the magnitude of their loss. They should have nurtured and protected the sentinel in their midst and been honored that he considered them his tribe, but instead they abused him with whistles, while the media followed him around making his life hell.

“We all share the blame for what happened to Jim, but especially me for exposing him. He had to hide from all of us and so he had no backup here.” Blair’s voice choked as he forced down a

sob. "Losing him here is my fault, the media's fault and Cascade's fault." Blair paused to wipe a tear that trickled down his cheek and then decided to tell it all. "And the worst part is because of all the media rabble rousing, I never got to tell Jim that I was in love with him."

Wendy Hawthorne could hear the pain coming in waves off of Blair Sandburg as she leaned closer, a hand resting on his arm. "Are you outing yourself?" she asked softly.

Blair couldn't believe anyone would care, or ask about, something so trivial in the face of such a disaster. "What does it matter? The man I loved is gone. At least he got to give his life doing what he does best, saving others." Blair turned away but Hawthorne called after him.

"How will this impact the sentinel series?"

Blair turned and looked back at her as though she had grown two heads and then shook his head, his wet curls whipping about his face. "You know," he began softly. "Jim told me to 'go for the brass ring' when the sentinel thing came out. He was wrong. It wasn't a brass ring, it was an iron ring and now it's over. I'm going to give up writing about the sentinel. Without Jim, there's no joy in it. My muse washed away with..." his hands indicated the water. With those last words, Blair Sandburg walked away.

### \*\*\*Endings and Beginnings



Though Jim would not be officially considered dead for seven years (unless the body was found) a memorial service was held two weeks later. The ceremony was held with full honors, Cascade mourning one of its most important citizens. Sally came and Carolyn, Jim's ex wife, as did all of Major Crimes, dressed in official blues. The Commissioner and Mayor were also in attendance and the PD set up an honor guard, inside and outside the funeral parlor, to keep out the press.

Conspicuously missing was Steven Ellison, who chose that week to be out of the country on business and unreachable.

The television had replayed Blair's interview several times as the search for Jim turned up nothing, officials finally deciding Jim's body had been washed out to sea. All of Major Crimes had heard Blair's confession at Northgate Bridge and it softened their attitudes towards their one-time teammate. At the service, Simon and Joel planted themselves beside Blair as a guard when others came to talk with him. Naomi quietly floated in the background, understanding what this had cost her son and trying to offer what support she could. After the service she tried to console and talk Blair into going away with her to India but Blair shook his head. He had made his life here and here he would stay. Travel just didn't have the same appeal, nothing did.

After the service Blair decided to move into Jim's cabin. According to Jim's will, he was Jim's heir and Blair doubted Steven would contest his living there. It was, he supposed, as close as he would ever get to being with Jim. A week before the move, he went to see Sid Graham and told him there would be no more stories about the sentinel and that he was retiring from the literary field. Graham had shaken his head more in annoyance than anything else before flying home to New York. Blair also went to Rainier University and tendered his resignation.

And, he had finally decided to settle things with his mother. She was preparing for a trip to India and he went to see her and talk with her. Two hours later, after crying in each other's arms, she gave him a kiss as he prepared to leave and made him promise to keep in touch.

Simon and Joel were not nearly as emotional but made Blair promise to call at least once a week to let them know how he was doing and then Blair left, heading north.

It actually took a lot longer to reach the cabin with the Northgate Bridge washed out but Blair was glad he didn't have to go near the place where his life had floated away. It was late in the evening when he pulled up in front of the cabin and, fumbling with the keys, opened the door peering into the dark interior. Groping for a light, he turned on the lamp nearest the door and looked around. As one would expect with a sentinel, the place was spotlessly clean, everything well ordered and clutter free. Letting his backpack sit by the door, Blair moved into the room and looked around.

The last time he had been here, Jim had been standing by the mantel telling him to leave and Blair moved over to it and looked at the two pictures prominently displayed there. One was of Major Crimes and the other, Jim and Blair, fishing. Blair could remember the trip when that picture was taken. Jim and Simon had taken him camping and Jim had taught him fly fishing.

Taking the picture frame, Blair let his hand slip over the picture before he hugged it to his chest and collapsed onto the sofa with a dismal sigh.

Things had gone so wrong in his life he wasn't sure he even wanted to try to keep going. There was nothing he wanted besides his sentinel. He wondered if it was a guide thing. Maybe guides didn't live without their sentinels.

Standing, he put the picture back on the mantel and looked around the room. He knew this was no longer a room but more a tomb as he walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. There was some beer and water in the fridge and some color-coded Tupperware. Deciding he didn't have the energy to deal with food that had gone bad, he turned to inspect the rest of the cabin.

There were two guest bedrooms on either side of the fireplace and Blair took just a quick glance at those before moving to the master bedroom. Opening the door, the dim light from the living room swept over the room and Blair froze, his face losing all color as he stared at the bed. Stretched out on the bed, hands crossed behind his head, was Jim Ellison.



Sure he had lost his mind, Blair took a step into the room and stared at the body.

"Hey Chief," Jim smiled and then seeing the younger man trembling, ready to faint, jumped up and grabbed him. "Easy Sandburg, I'm not a ghost."

"You?you're?"

"Yeah, I'm alive," Jim answered as Blair threw himself into Jim's arms with sob.

"We have to let people know, they all think you're dead."

Slowly Jim pulled free and cupped Blair's face in his hands. "Simon and the MC gang know, Sally knows, so does Carolyn. Nobody else needs to know. This is my chance to be free of the whole sentinel thing. I'm not Jim Ellison anymore. I'm James Lawson."

As understanding dawned in Blair's eyes, Jim smiled. "James Lawson, but how?"

"After I got the kids out of the water, I coasted along for a while and then made it to a small pool on the side of the river. As I was dragging myself out of the water it occurred to me I could just leave the whole sentinel thing behind. I still had connections that could get me a new identity. I'll have to change my appearance a little, regrow my mustache, let my hair grow out a bit, and probably move but it was a chance to start over."

"I... Jim," Blair stammered in shock.

"You love me," Jim answered with a smile. "I heard that on the news."

Blair nodded and moved back into Jim's arms, needing to feel him solid.

"Maybe, we need to sit down and figure out how to start over," Jim whispered into Blair's curls before tilting Blair's head up and kissing him. "Together. Because I love you too, Blair."