



# Missing Persons

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By Unbelievable2

Illustrated by stargatesg1971

## Chapter 1

The motor stopped, and suddenly there was silence. Not absolute, of course. He could hear his own harsh breathing, and that of the other men pressed close to him in the back of the truck. But after the noise and the din of the journey, the quiet felt unnatural. Now that the air was still, the cloth bag over his head was suffocating. He strained at his hearing, twisting his head to and fro to gauge what would happen next, but for a moment all he heard was the sound of the night; a light breeze, the whispers of the dust settling around the truck's tyres, somewhere far away an owl. Then a truck door opened and he could hear boots on the stones. And suddenly the cloth bag was wrenched from his head and he was blinking in the beam of a flashlight.

“Okay, all of you, out”.

The tailgate fell. Stumbling over each other the ten men tried to make their way down from the back of the truck, but rough blows from behind meant they all landed in a tumble in the dust by the truck wheels. Then his arms were grabbed and he was yanked to his feet.

They stood in a loose circle together, shivering, pinned there by the flashlights. The man next to him – his teeth were chattering. Someone else may have been sobbing quietly. All around him there was the smell of fear. He pulled again at the bonds around his wrists – no more use than before - and like his fellows screwed up his eyes to try to look beyond the bright light. Then another sound; soft, lilting. Nearer and nearer came a gentle rhythm of hooves, and the quiet jingling of harness. Suddenly he was aware of horsemen looming out of the darkness behind the torch-beams.

Someone grabbed his shoulders, and a knife freed his hands. Rubbing his wrists he looked at his fellows and again at the circle of riders. The gentle huffing of the horses and the clinking of bridles were at odds with the menacing silence of their riders. Then one rider sat up straight in his saddle, and suddenly the air cracked and a man in the huddle shrieked and grabbed at his arm. The whip flicked back towards the horseman.

"You fellas want to leave, right?"

He was shaking now, really shaking.

"Okay, you got ten minutes. Then we come find you."

And he was running, they were all running. Blindly, through the dust and the sage scrub and the rocks and the stones; falling, scrambling up, pitching down again, and still running, running, running until the pounding of his heart was deafened by the pounding of hooves bearing down on him, and the full moon was just a blur in his sight.

A full moon. A hunter's moon.

## Chapter 2

Simon Banks stared dumbfounded at the man on the other side of the desk. The self-satisfaction with wealth and privilege came off the guy like a heatwave; suit, haircut, manicure – everything immaculate as he lorded it behind the heavy mahogany desk like Hollywood's idea of a mogul. All expenses paid by the City, no doubt, and the guy hadn't done a day's policing in his life.

"Sir, you can't be serious! This issue is settled, agreed with Chief of Police Warren!"

"Not settled with me, Captain Banks." The voice was still smooth and urbane. "And frankly I am amazed to think that Chief Warren felt that it was an outcome appropriate to such an unsatisfactory state of affairs....."

"Sir, Blair Sandburg has made an outstanding contribution to the PD, and especially Major Crimes unit..."

"Outstanding? You call the fiasco of the Klaus Zeller case 'outstanding'? Major Crimes made to look like a three-ring circus, officers shot, journalists having a field day with our reputation? You regard this as a successful outcome, Captain Banks?"

The bland tones slipped away. Now Simon could hear a politician who had climbed his way up over the bodies of his opponents. He fought to keep his voice steady and not give way to his own anger.

"Sir, may I remind you that Zeller was apprehended and prevented from carrying out his planned assassination."

"And then," continued Police Commissioner Wade, riding straight over Simon's words, "you feel it appropriate to offer Mr Sandburg a badge – a Detective's badge no less! And this to a self-acknowledged academic fraud! I have to say, Captain Banks, I'm very surprised at your lack of judgement on the point. I was mindful..."

Wade gestured loosely at Simon's crutches, propped against the chair opposite.

"...that the trauma of your injury may have caused you to be less than judicious."

"Sir, I must protest here! My injuries have no bearing on my ability to run my department!"

"That may be your opinion, Captain Banks, but I was going to observe that I now know that you have been granting ride-along rights to Mr Sandburg for over three years! Unregularised, uncontrolled, unlicensed... Do we employ vigilantes now, Captain Banks?"

Simon's relative lack of mobility had one good point, right now. And that was his inability to leap up and use a swift left hook to knock the bastard right back into his own espresso machine – a cup of which, Simon noted sourly, hadn't even been offered to him on his arrival. The Major Crimes Captain gripped the arms of his chair and strove to keep his voice level.

"I repeat, Sir, Blair Sandburg has been a significant asset to Major Crimes and his colleagues over the past three plus years. He has put his own life at risk on countless occasions to protect his partner and others. His position was accepted by your predecessor, as well as Chief Warren..."

Simon raised a hand to stop Wade's interruption

"... And while I appreciate this was not your decision in the first place, I would like to make clear that Mr Sandburg's academic knowledge and remarkable intellect has given us fresh views on policing that we benefit from every day. And that the story of academic fraud needs further explanation. I can assure you that had the Zeller case been more straightforward..."

Wade stood.

"That's quite enough, Captain. I didn't ask you here for a debate."

"I had hoped this meeting today was to discuss my complaint about my enforced sick leave and my replacement in Major Crimes by Captain Bellwood."

"Captain Banks, notwithstanding any high regard I might have your career to date..."

Simon's eyes narrowed.

"... I have to tell you, I would not make it my business to involve myself in any dispute you have with the PD's personnel department..."

"Sir, I am being prevented from returning to work..."

Wade sighed heavily with exasperation.

"Banks, you returned to active duty far too early, against doctors' advice and the new PD personnel guidelines. The City cannot expose itself to a potential suit..."

"Sir, I would never...!" Simon's voice was genuinely shocked.

"... a potential suit should your health be affected by your actions. You failed to follow guidelines as required by your contract of employment. Your personnel department has had no option but to place you on long-term sick leave until your complaint is resolved and the situation regularised. Captain Bellwood will remain at Major Crimes until that point."

Wade turned away from Simon and poured himself another coffee.

"To return to my subject, I asked you to come here today so I could do you the courtesy of informing you face-to-face about the change to Mr Sandburg's situation. Frankly I have to wonder why I bothered."

He took a tiny sip of espresso.

"You completely fail to grasp the unsuitability of Sandburg's role, and his presence at the PD. He is a PR liability and a potential litigation nightmare. He leaves now. I want him out by the end of the day."

"But Sir, his partner..."

"Ah, yes, the partner." Wade leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Simon's.

"Detective Ellison. Tell me, Captain, what the hell is going on there? They share a house, I believe? They socialise together, they vacation together..."

Simon's voice was icy.

"I hope, Sir, you aren't implying anything here?"

"I am implying nothing," said Wade quickly. "Frankly I couldn't care less what they get up to in their personal lives. But I do care if it impacts on the PD."

And on your career, thought Simon grimly.

"I am astounded," Wade continued, "you let this situation persist in your Department so long, Banks. This Detective Ellison - you give the impression that he can't function without Mr Sandburg's presence. Surely that can't be the case, Captain, can it? Because frankly, if a

detective in our PD was to show that kind of dependency on a colleague, I would have to question that detective's state of mind."

"Sir, I don't think you comprehend fully the bond between partners in the PD."

"Oh, I understand that, Captain. But all police officers must surely understand that things move on. Partnerships change."

Wade smiled unpleasantly at Simon.

"So I'm sure Detective Ellison will be completely capable of doing without his little helper, because his job will depend upon it. And if he wants to keep that job, I insist he regularises his home life as well."

"What?" Simon was reduced now to spluttering. "You can't violate the man's personal rights!"

"I can if it affects the police service. The public look to us to provide effective policing, not preside over some Departmental soap opera. If Ellison wants to stay with the Department then I suggest he tells Sandburg to find some alternative accommodation. I will not..."

Wade slammed his coffee cup down, little droplets splashing his cuff in the process.

"...repeat, not have the PD a continued source of media speculation and idle gossip, or a hang-out for unemployed and failed academics. This situation ends right now!"

Wade sat down again, huffed, then pulled some papers together and made show of reading them.

"That will be all, Captain," he said, glancing at the still speechless Simon. "Do let my secretary know if you need any assistance leaving the building. And don't forget those."

He indicated the crutches, gave the semblance of a smile, and then turned again to his papers.

Simon got up slowly, still shaken.

"Well," he said, almost to himself. "I won't enjoy breaking the news."

Wade looked up again, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that, Captain. Like I said, this meeting was merely a courtesy to you. Captain Bellwood and my aide are informing Sandburg and Ellison of my decision as we speak."

## Chapter 3

Jim Ellison slapped his hand down on Simon's desk, which was now Bellwood's desk. And wasn't that all part of this fuck-up, too?

"You've got a nerve, Prentiss, laying this on him! On us! Blair Sandburg's role in this department has been nothing but beneficial to all who know him. And he's my partner. You're ignoring three years of hard work and dedication to this City?"

Jim had risen from his chair as the bombshell hit, and was now leaning threateningly over the desk, glaring at the slim young apparatchik who had delivered the news. The man was lounging against the bookcase behind Bellwood's desk, quite relaxed. In the chair next to Jim, Blair had been sitting motionless until this point, his face ashen. Now he stretched out a restraining hand and touched his friend's arm briefly.

"Jim, cool it, man. Hear them out."

Bellwood, somewhat overshadowed by the tall figure looming over him, looked from Blair to Jim.

"You should listen to what Sandburg says, Ellison. This is a serious matter. You don't want to shoot your mouth off until you understand the score right now."

Jim looked down at him, a thin, ascetic-looking man, with a sour face and a permanently pained expression. Ulcers were his curse.

"You go along with this bullshit, Captain? And here's me hoping you'd be more prepared to back up your men."

"Ellison, I'm doing what I can here, but if you want to remain with Major Crimes then there need to be some changes in your working patterns. You need to come into the fold, Detective, abide by the rules. Then it seems to me you're worth backing up."

Jim was conscious of a gentle touch to his arm again, a little more insistent now.

"Jim, man..."

He led himself subside back in his chair, but still fixed his glare on the man standing behind Bellwood.

"I would have thought the Commissioner should be satisfied by Major Crimes' resolution rate, Mr Prentiss. Especially mine and Sandburg's. You want effective policing? You got it with Sandburg and me."

Lance Prentiss smiled patronisingly.

"You're still missing the point, Detective. We, ah, the Commissioner, that is, has no difficulty with your conviction record."

"Detective of the Year," muttered Blair quietly.

Prentiss looked sharply at him.

"Indeed, Mr Sandburg. An exemplary record. But that's not the issue here, is it? The main issue is you."

Blair stared back, eyes hard, lips compressed.

"The Commissioner, quite properly, has a serious concern about your continued presence in this Department," continued Prentiss. "Do I need to remind you? You have never been employed by the Police Department, either as civilian staff or in any other capacity. You are not a serving officer, trainee or otherwise. Yet you have been afforded unparalleled access to the Police Department's records as well as confidential information relating to its casework. If that wasn't bad enough in its own right, there is the risk of litigation..."

"Now just a damn minute," snarled Jim, ready to leap at this man's throat again. Bellwood thrust a bony finger in his direction.

"Back down, Detective! One more insubordinate interruption and you are suspended forthwith!"

Prentiss smiled at Jim, quite calm, and turned again to Blair.

"You are an anomaly, Mr Sandburg. And whilst Commissioner Wade's predecessor and Chief Warren were apparently prepared to overlook that, he is not. He has noted that it has required the oversight of relative outsiders, such as Captain Finkelman and Captain Bellwood here, to point out the unsuitability of the situation..."

Jim glowered at Bellwood.

"Have you really spoken to her? Finkelman was fine with it. Captain Bellwood barely knows us."

"My point exactly. The Commissioner believes Captain Banks' judgement is less objective than it should have been, owing to this rather... shall we say... 'cosy' arrangement?"

"Don't you dare impugn Simon Banks!"

"The facts speak for themselves, Detective Ellison. Moreover, the debacle of the Zeller case confirmed the Commissioner's view entirely."

Prentiss turned again to Blair.

"He regards your presence in the Police Department as erroneous, disruptive, and potentially dangerous to the good name of the PD."

He straightened up.

"And that's why the Commissioner requires me to inform you, as I repeat now, that your association with the Police Department is ended. This, and any offer of further involvement with this Department, including training at the Academy and...", his eyes flicked back to Ellison's granite face for second, "...and particularly the suggestion that you might attain a Detective's badge and work legitimately within the Department, is rescinded forthwith."

There was a heavy pause. Blair was staring at some point beyond Bellwood's head. Jim's voice growled out from an iron-set jaw.

"You want lawsuits? I'll give you a lawsuit! And the Union won't be happy either."

Prentiss gave him a pitying look and turned to gaze out of the window. Bellwood took that as his cue to deliver the coup de grace.

"Grow up, Detective. There can be no lawsuit. Sandburg's presence here is unofficial and unsupported. It's time this ride-along nonsense stopped, and this is how it happens. And as for the Union, you're kidding yourself if you think that they're going to be keen to defend an unofficial hanger-on when they've got plenty of legit cops needing their help."

"He's right, Jim." Blair's quiet voice broke through the tension. "There are no formal means of redress or resolution here. I have no official position. Never have had."

Jim's head snapped round to look directly at his friend. Blair's face was impassive but his eyes spoke volumes. Jim saw there a quiet desperation for him to tread carefully. That wasn't what he felt like doing, and Blair knew it.

His friend spoke again, with a meaningful glance towards their acting superior.

"Jim, listen to Captain Bellwood."

"You can work solo, Ellison," continued Bellwood, "or I can pair you with someone – maybe."

"Sandburg is my partner," snapped Jim. "I work with him."

"No, you don't, Detective." Bellwood voice was sharp. He was sick to the back teeth with this inherited Departmental problem. Finally, here was a way out. "You don't need an untrained civilian to help you do your job properly."

Jim exploded.



"Untrained? He's worked over three years in this Department! He's a better detective and a better partner than anyone out there!" He gestured with his arm towards the bullpen beyond the glazed door.

"Lower your voice, Detective!" snapped Bellwood.

Prentiss smirked again.

"I'm sure your colleagues are pleased to hear your estimation of them, Detective."

"Well, I don't give a rat's ass, because I don't need another partner."

Blair grabbed his arm again, his look urgent.

"Leave it, Jim! Not now! This isn't doing any good!"

"You see," drawled Prentiss, "this is just what the Commissioner is concerned about. You seem to focus a deal too much on the PD acceding to your personal whims, Ellison. Are you really saying that you can't do your job unless Mr Sandburg is present? Think carefully, because if you do, I really think we need to consider more seriously your continued role in the PD."

Jim froze. He looked from Prentiss' smirk to Bellwood's set scowl and to Blair's mute appeal, feeling sickened. This threat against the two of them wasn't the only concern, however crucial it was to him personally. Simon's banishment from the Department seemed to be part of the same campaign. He'd already heard whispers from elsewhere in the PD of changes happening, and personnel demoralised, side-lined or replaced. The more he protested, the more this might affect Major Crimes as a whole, and the lives and jobs of his other colleagues there. He ran a hand over his face and took a breath.

"No, I'm not saying that, Mr Prentiss. But I am saying that I work better with Sandburg. And the Police Department functions better, too, for Sandburg's presence. So you can tell the Commissioner he hasn't heard the last of this..."

"Oh, I think he has, Detective," said Prentiss smoothly. "Captain Bellwood – if you would be so kind...?"

Bellwood opened a slim folder on his desk and pushed the contents towards Blair.

"Sign this, Sandburg. It makes clear the termination of your involvement with PD and requires your confidentiality on certain matters..."

"Chief, don't touch that!"

Blair looked at the piece of paper, scanned it briefly and held out his hand.

"Pen, please?"

"Chief, God dammit!" Jim suddenly whirled on Blair, catching him by the arm and pulling him close.

"Talk to a lawyer. Don't sign anything away. This Department owes you! You gave up your career for it! You gave your life for it, for Christ's sake!"

Blair shook his arm free, his eyes locked on Jim's.

"No, I didn't, Jim," he replied quietly. "Not for the PD. You know that."

Then he turned, bent his head over the desk again, and signed. Jim looked on aghast. When Blair straightened up, even Bellwood felt uncomfortable seeing the mask of cold calm over the young man's features, far more unsettling than Ellison's barely-contained fury. That fury now seemed to be directed as much towards Sandburg as at himself and Prentiss. Sandburg by contrast seemed completely impassive. Bellwood had a sudden desperate urge to bring the whole distasteful business to a close. He turned to the Commissioner's aide.

"I guess that's all business sorted, Mr Prentiss?"

"Not quite," began the other man, but there was a tentative rap on the door. Bellwood looked up in irritation, about to bellow his displeasure, when the door opened and Rhonda's head appeared.

"Captain, I'm sorry, it's just..."

"Not now, Rhonda!"

"No, I'm sorry, Captain, but it's important."

To Bellwood's intense irritation, his secretary showed no intention of following his direction. What is it with this Department? he thought sourly. They better get used to me because Banks isn't coming back any time soon.

The rest of Rhonda entered the room and she moved quickly over to Jim and put a hand on his arm. Still overwhelmed with dismay at the sudden turn of events, the detective focused on her with difficulty.

"Jim, I'm sorry, your phone's been ringing off the hook, and you left your cell on the desk and that's been ringing too, so we answered it. It's the authorities in Spain. Your father and brother have been in a car crash."

Her words changed the dynamics in the room in a flash. Jim's face froze. Blair, his own expression softening immediately, moved close to him, clasping his shoulder.

"Oh, man..."

Jim grasped Rhonda's arms tightly, but she spoke before he did.

"They're alive, Jim, but there are problems. Steven's broken his leg quite badly, but your father – well, it sounds like he might have had a heart attack or something."

Jim gave Blair a stricken look, then turned to Bellwood.

"Captain...?"

Bellwood waved his hand, sighing heavily.

"Go, Detective. Take some time, sort things out."

"Thank you, Captain. Sandburg, all the contact details and stuff are at the loft. I'm going home. I'll get a cab. The Volvo's here, you can follow me, yeah?"

"I'll be right behind you, Jim. Go, go."

He shooed Jim out of the door and watched him grab walking stick, jacket, phone, and keys from his desk, together with Rhonda's meticulously transcribed message. Then in a limping flurry he was gone.

Blair closed the door quietly and turned to face the other two men.

"Mr Prentiss, you implied there was some other matter for – ah – discussion." The last word carried a heavy measure of contempt.

It was Bellwood's turn now to rise and look out of the window, his back to them. He looked uncomfortable. Even more than usual, thought Blair, grimly. Well, well. What could be coming next?

Prentiss perched on the edge of Bellwood's desk.

"It's fortuitous that Detective Ellison has been called away. I suspect his reaction to this final point would be even more unhelpful than before."

Bellwood huffed at this, but he still didn't turn round, and Prentiss ignored him.

"The fact is, Mr Sandburg," he continued, "the Commissioner is deeply concerned about the detriment to the Police Department's reputation caused by the messy business of the past few weeks, and he sees your and Detective Ellison's roles as pivotal in this. Also, he feels strongly that a line needs to be drawn underneath it, so the press furore can calm down, and the PD get on with its proper work."

"Yeah, we heard all about the Commissioner's gripe already today, Mr Prentiss" said Blair coldly. "What can we add? The furore, such as it was, is pretty much faded by now. I'm surprised you haven't noticed. Anyway, as you've already removed me from the PD and I don't have any influence anywhere else with anyone, I fail to see what it has to do with me."

While he had been talking he had gathered up his dismissal letter and folded it neatly. Now he grabbed his rucksack, thrust the letter inside and made to leave.

"So I would say we're done."

Prentiss raised a hand.

"Mr Sandburg, putting it bluntly, the Commissioner feels your disruptive presence here persists as long as your association with Detective Ellison continues."

Blair looked incredulous.

"My association? He's my friend! What the hell relevance is...?"

He froze.

"Oh, I can't believe I'm hearing this! Are you implying...? Do you mean...?"

Eyes blazing, he slung his backpack over his shoulder and made for the door, only to halt with his hand on the door-handle, and turn again.

"So the Commissioner is a not-so-closet homophobe? Well, for someone who is so obsessed with public relations, I've got to say his wires are seriously crossed. Oh, the press are going to love this..."

He whirled back into the room and advanced on Prentiss, stabbing at the air in front of him with his forefinger to emphasise his words.

"For the record, Jim Ellison and I are not in a sexual relationship. For the record, Jim Ellison is the straightest guy on this planet. Not that any of that is any of your damn business, or the Commissioner's. But we both resent deeply any judgement made by anyone in this PD on the basis of gender preference!"

"Mr Sandburg..."

"Captain Bellwood, what the hell is going on here? Oh, this has gone much too far now. Jesus, ripping me out of the PD is one thing, but this! So the Commissioner wants to fuck around with the human rights of his employees, does he? Well, he's going to have to seriously revise that plan, because his ass is going to get sued from here to D.C. And as for his pretensions to the Senate that we keep reading about, well, he can just kiss goodbye to them right now."

He moved to leave again, but Prentiss spoke quickly.

"You can't do that, Mr Sandburg."

Blair whirled again.

"Oh, I can't? Who's going to stop me now? You got no claim on me, we both just signed it away."

Prentiss gave him an understanding smile.

"Mr Sandburg, I appreciate your disquiet, really I do, but in fact the Commissioner is unconcerned about your and Detective Ellison's – ah – sexual preferences - one way or the other, so to speak. They are irrelevant to him. He can however point to numerous incidents when your close association with Detective Ellison has brought disruption and disarray to the PD. His solution is simple. You are a destructive influence. Remove the association and Detective Ellison can go about his work, as can others in the Department. I'm sure I don't have to point out that if this distraction continues, the Commissioner feels it will be difficult for Detective Ellison to maintain his position in the Department."

"You threatening me now, Mr Prentiss? You threatening me and Jim?"

"I'm not making a threat, Mr Sandburg, just pointing out a very likely outcome. You might also want to reflect on how your refusal to comply might affect your colleagues here, including your former Captain. You see, it's sometimes difficult to make clear distinctions in such cases...."

Blair looked in appeal to Bellwood, who by now had turned from the window though he showed no desire to meet Blair's eyes. But he grudgingly spoke.

"The Commissioner wouldn't find that easy to do, Mr Prentiss. There are plenty of legal obstacles, and rightly so."

"Oh, the Commissioner doesn't expect it to be easy," said Prentiss smoothly. "He just wishes to point out that it will happen."

He turned again to Blair.

"Do I make myself clear, Mr Sandburg?"

Blair stared him down.

"Crystal, Mr Prentiss."

"Good," replied Prentiss, picking up his briefcase. "Thank you both your time. Captain Bellwood, I look forward to developments."

Blair watched him go, and turned again to Bellwood. The man's sour expression was a constant, but irritation with Prentiss' behaviour was also visible in the Captain's long face. The man raised a hand to ward off any further argument and sat down at his desk.

"I don't know what arrangements you and Ellison cooked up with Captain Banks. Maybe they worked out, maybe they didn't. But I have to run this Department now as I see fit, and frankly I don't want to fight the Commissioner on this."

Bellwood reached behind for the coffee pot and poured himself some of the thick black liquid stewing there.

"Ellison is a good cop. I don't want to lose him, but everyone is expendable at the end of the day, Sandburg. I think maybe it's time for some pragmatism."

The other man seemed not to hear. Blair was standing in the middle of the office, turning slowly, his gaze raking over the walls, desk, table, Simon's pictures and his fishing memorabilia still on display, the coffee machine. He mentally tagged them all, locking them in his memory. Then he snapped to attention, and turned to Bellwood again, with a bitter smile.

"Pragmatism, Captain? You could be right."

He opened the office door.

"Oh, you know what, Captain? You might find digestion easier if you lay off the coffee. Try some herbal teas. Rhonda has a store of them by now."

Bellwood didn't offer a farewell handshake, but he stood by the door as Blair left, walking swiftly between the desks of the bullpen, hair flouncing, jacket swaying. The young man didn't stop or speak to any of his frankly bewildered former colleagues who waited in vain to understand the reason for the argument of the past half-hour in the Captain's office. Not that Bellwood had any intention of enlightening them. He waited until Blair had disappeared into the elevator then returned to his desk, lifted his phone, and told front desk security to make sure that Blair Sandburg's pass was removed from him before he left the building for the last time.

He had only just replaced the receiver in the cradle when there was another tap on the door, and Rhonda appeared once more.

"Captain..."

He sighed and held up a hand to forestall the expected apology. Except he didn't. Because it wasn't.

"What happened to Blair?"

He did a double-take. What was it with Banks and these people? Did they have no idea of discipline and hierarchy?

"Because the whole Department is concerned, Captain."

He regarded her closely. Her expression was perfectly polite, almost deferential. But Bellwood had been a cop for centuries. He could read people, all right. The look in her eyes was defiant. That did it.

“Well, I'm glad you popped in, Rhonda,” he said, lacing his voice with sarcasm, “because I'd like you to circulate a memo to the entire Department. Oh, and the support staff, too. Blair Sandburg is no longer part of this team. His visiting rights have been rescinded. Please convey this to our personnel and instruct them that if Sandburg is seen in the building from here on in, Security should be notified and I am to be informed immediately.”

A true pro, Rhonda's expression barely changed, but her eyes hardened perceptibly.

“I see. Are you going to draft that memo, sir?”

“No. You can do it.”

“Uh-huh.”

In those two syllables, Bellwood heard her judgement, and that of the whole Department, on what they no doubt took to be his cowardice. Well, screw them.

“You know, Captain...”

“That's all, Rhonda,” he said abruptly. “I suggest you get on with your work. We've all wasted enough time on this little wannabe and his only friend.”

Rhonda arched a finely-groomed eyebrow.

“You're wrong there, Captain. That's what I wanted to tell you. Blair Sandburg has lots of friends.

## Chapter 4

Blair sat at the back of the Al-Maghrib at the rickety stained-wood table and stared blankly at the laptop. He had several screen-pages open – one was a copy of a CV, and another a half-finished letter for a job application. Except that, really, was there any way he would send it? The letter was to a passing acquaintance, a young professor in one of the small mid-west universities. A basic teaching job had come up and it made sense to apply. Except.... Except....

He flicked back to the other open screen-pages. Forbes on Duncan Wade; company stats on Etruscan Holdings, one of Duncan Wade's main investment vehicles; local newspaper reports on Duncan Wade....

Except this was just diversion as well. So what that he felt that there was something bigger behind Wade's victimisation of Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg? So what if his animosity towards this stranger, with the power of professional life-and-death, currently knew no reasonable bounds? Trying to divine nefarious motives from the Cascade Times' reports of the man's charitable work was pissing in the wind. All it was doing was allowing him not focus on the big issue.

Him and Jim. Blair and Jim. If he forced himself to look at it at all dispassionately, could he not appreciate that outside observers were more than a little freaked out by this crazy closed society of two that he and Jim had created? Which of them was most at fault here? True, he had pursued his Sentinel, but Jim, for all his repressed emotions, had met him pretty much head-on in the establishment that cosy little co-dependency. Was this healthy? Was waking up in the morning and finding pretty much your first thought was whether the guy in the room upstairs was going to have a good day? Was it healthy to crave the company of someone to the extent that completeness and well-being were eventually found only in their company? Especially when the other person's attitude in return had, recently, turned out to be – shall we say – pretty flaky?

Blair put his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes.

He was doing Jim a disservice. Surely. The offer of that Detective's badge had been genuine, he knew. He knew also that it was partly an apology from Jim for the man's treatment of Blair in the prior months. There was a whole truckload of baggage that the two of them had failed so far to sort out. Yeah, they were getting there, but man, this had been no minor spat about who forgot to put gas in the truck. Jim's long-running distrust of the dissertation had lain in the background all the years they had been together. Throw in some monumental examples of misjudgements on Blair's part, and the catalyst of Alex Barnes, and suddenly what he had once called bedrock – his friendship with Jim – felt more like shifting sands

And the badge. Oh, man.

He loved the PD. Genuinely, truly, loved it and his work with Jim. It was a rush every time he found his vast reservoir of accumulated weird knowledge could be useful in actually helping people, rather than gathering dust on a university library shelf. The excitement never dissipated. But actually being a cop...

Ironically, Wade may have done him a favour, by taking the decision out of his own hands. It had only been – what, a fortnight ago? – merely days before the meeting with Prentiss, that Blair had been sitting at the loft table in the early evening with all his Academy texts spread out in front of him when something snapped. He had thrown his head back and howled at the ceiling.

"This is SOOOO BORING!!!!!"



And ten seconds later the door had clicked and Jim Ellison had been there, standing on the threshold. Jesus, he had been walking down the corridor. They had looked at each other for a long time. Despite his own confusion he reckoned he had seen a flash of real pain in the other man's eyes. Eventually, he said:

"You heard."

Jim had snorted.

"I could've heard you in Tacoma, Chief. With or without Sentinel ears."

"I'm sorry, man. Really. I didn't mean...."

Jim had shut the door firmly, given a brief smile and shucked off his jacket.

"Course you did. It is boring. All basic stuff is. But it's essential. You'll get through it."

And that had been that. They had gone through the rest of the evening to all intents and purposes quite amicably. But Blair hadn't been prepared to tell Jim any more, and Jim hadn't been going to ask.

Yep, pretty sound indicator there, Sandburg, he thought, back in the present and sipping the Al-Maghrib's mint tea, which, by the way, they did really well. Also, it was the cheapest thing on the menu. He wondered vaguely whether he could get the PD to reimburse him the \$93 he had forked out in Academy publications, on the basis of their misrepresentation that he had had a future with them.

Ah yes, the future.

Blair usually set a pretty high store on Karma. Going to Rainier, finding the Burton text, meeting Jim, finding that perfect goddamn friendship. It had all fallen into place like this was the grand plan for Blair Sandburg. Right now though, it felt like Karma was being a trifle fickle. Alex Barnes, dissertation disaster, Wade.... Now all he could see was big letters in the sky, a mile high:

Time to move on.

But he couldn't leave it. Not like that.

Him and Jim. Jim and him. Had Karma now sent them Wade to help make the break? Because, to be honest, he felt he couldn't give up Jim Ellison any more than he could give up breathing. Well, in fact, he'd already tried the not-breathing part, and look where that had got him. But if making that break was essential to maintaining the man's position in the world, and the role where Jim could most effectively fulfil his purpose as Sentinel, then surely that was the path to take?

And common sense said that such a move would allow them both to get their friendship, relationship, whatever you wanted to call it, properly in perspective. Like normal people.

Yeah, thought Blair. I'm all for normality. It's my middle name.

But the manner of this parting stuck in his craw. Intuitively, something felt wrong. Yes, it was Departmental politics. Hell, even City and State politics with Wade in the mix. But there was something intrinsically off about the whole process. Jim and he had weathered storms before - Acting Captain Finkelman's response to them for one - but overall, Ellison's exceptional reputation had kept the PD proud and supportive. Zeller hadn't really been enough to change that, he was convinced. Blair stared at the image of Commissioner Wade smiling out of the web page. Unbidden, Michael Jackson's lyrics surfaced in his brain - "you've been hit by a Smoooooth Criminal...". Something was rotten in the state of Cascade, he thought grimly. And he was damned determined to get to the bottom of it, for both Jim and himself.

But how? Right now he was at best a nonentity, at worse a discredited, friendless...

As if on cue, his cellphone rang: an unfamiliar, overseas number.

"Chief, you okay?"

Blair smiled, in spite of himself, and took a big calming breath.

"Jim, I'm fine, man. How're you? Isn't it the middle of the night with you? Has something happened?"

"No, same old same old. I just can't sleep. I called the loft. It's six o'clock with you. I thought maybe you'd be home by now."

Blair raised his teacup and toasted his absent friend. So much for resolve. When he could hear the waves of concern over the satellite link, his heart swelled. There was so much he and Jim Ellison had. Such a shame to say goodbye to it.

"Jim, I'm drinking mint tea in the Al-Maghrib for a change. Doing a little paperwork."

"The Moroccan place? Why there?"

Blair bit his lip.

"Because it's not near Rainier or the PD?"

"Oh."

Jim got it in one. Nowhere near where Blair might run into old friends. Not at the Loft where old friends could pop in.

"Chief, just hang in there. We'll get this sorted as soon as I get back.

"Jim, I hear you. But what I don't hear is how your dad and Steven are doing."

Even over thousands of miles, Blair could sense the pursing of lips as Jim got the "I hear you" diversion, but his friend played long.

"Steven, poor guy – still in traction. Another three weeks, they said today, but you know, Blair, I've seen worse breaks. I think the hospital is milking it. They see rich Americans...."

"You are rich Americans!"

"Can it, Chief!" Blair heard the suppressed smile in his voice. "That's beside the point. I'm going to try to get a second opinion. Steven's champing at the bit to get out of there. Dammit, this was only supposed to be a two-week break."

"Well, Steven got his break...."

"Sandburg!"

"Come on, man, what about your dad?"

There was a slight pause. When Jim spoke, Blair could hear the change in his voice.

"He's bearing up, and they are stabilising him. But there was a fair amount of damage done, I think. We're seeing the consultants again tomorrow. They've already told him he may need a triple bypass. His arteries are in a bad way. You'd never think, would you? He wasn't looking bad."

"Man, it's not just about the lifestyle. It could be in his genes. Something you and Steven need to watch out for."

"Yeah, thanks for that, Dr Cheerful."

"You still gonna bring him home soon?"

"That's the plan, when he's stabilised, but I don't know if the airlines will let him fly. We may need to charter something. Do it at his own risk. But he wants the op done in Cascade, not where he doesn't understand the language."

Jim sighed.

"It's a doggone shame. He'd been so looking forward to this trip, the Pro-Am tournament, the best golf courses in Europe. And of all the twists of fate, you know. If Steven had been driving, not him. If Steven hadn't had quite so much to drink at the dinner so he dozed off in the car...." Now Blair could hear the exasperation in Jim's voice.

"Dammit, Blair, what was Steven thinking? He said he could see dad was under the weather that evening, but they still went to the golfing dinner. And he still got smashed!"

"Jim, hey, cool it. Steven's Steven, he doesn't have your observational skills, nor, frankly, your overriding concern for others. He just wouldn't have seen. It's spilt milk and we just have to deal with the cards we've been played."

Blair cringed at his mixed metaphors. Man, he was off his game. Jim didn't seem to notice though.

"Yeah, I know. You're right. Dammit, Chief, I want to come home. This thing with Bellwood and Wade is worrying me sick."

"Jim, me too, but your dad is the priority right now. Get him home and in Cascade General, then we can start thinking about taking on the Evil Empire." He paused, running his finger over the rim of the teacup. "Except, you know, I think maybe this is too big even for us." He let his voice trail off. You cowardly bastard, Sandburg, he thought.

There was a moment's pause. Then Jim spluttered into life.

"What d'you mean, Chief? You aren't giving up, are you? We haven't even started! We've got to fight this!"

"Jim, Jim, calm down. We can fight it, sure, but not if in the long run it destroys your career. That would be foolish. There are ways round. There must be. Look, we'll talk when you get home. Just be safe, yeah? Your senses okay over there? How's your leg?"

Jim huffed at the deliberate change of direction.

"Yeah, fine, I can manage. But..."

There was a pause.

"What, Jim?" Blair could hear Jim let out a long breath.

"Nothing, it's nothing. I'll tell you when I get back. Look, Chief, promise you won't do anything hasty. No rash decisions, okay? We'll work something out. Use my checking account if you need funds, there's plenty in there and God knows you've got the access."

There was another pause. Blair was aware his unaccustomed silence was unsettling Jim, but he couldn't think of anything useful to say.

"You do want to work something out, Chief, yeah?"

Oh, the worry was clear in his voice. Blair was hating himself for his sudden inability to roll over and say "yeah, Jim, sure thing, whatever you want." He shook himself.

"I'm sure we can, Jim," he said finally. "Now, look, I need to order something to eat or they'll exclude me from the Al-Maghrib as well. Phone me again soon, man, okay? And take care of yourself. Please."

"Chief..."

"Bye, Jim."

"Oh, okay. Bye, Chief."

Blair looked at the silent phone in his hand. Yeah, he felt bad about that. It was mean to cut Jim off. The guy had a lot on his plate. But he had been seriously worried there that he, Blair, would have caved into giving a little emotional display that would have just freaked Jim out even more and done nothing to help his own preparations to sort out his life in general. Damn, but he missed Jim. In almost four years they had barely been apart, and shouldn't he maybe acknowledge that as yet another indicator that he needed to take the path of change?

He smiled wryly to himself. The Sandburg genes were kicking in again. Naomi's passage through life was one of hail and farewell, goodbye and no hard feelings, and Blair had usually found it the soft option to follow that pattern, in dealing with his friends and acquaintances. Until he had found Jim; Jim, he had always been determined to keep.

Until now, at least.

\*

He wasn't going to eat at the Al-Maghrib. There was probably food at the Loft, somewhere. Rice or something, who knew? Maybe a beer or two. Then tomorrow he would finish packing up and be ready to move out as soon as one of the several opportunities for lodging that he was warming up came through. However gung- ho Jim was feeling about fighting the law, Blair was pretty sure that the law would win. He was absolutely convinced about Wade's threat. He would be gone within the week, and hash things out with Jim when the other man got back.

He started gathering together the various papers on the table, and newspapers with job ads and accommodation ads circled in red, when something slid out from within a notepad; a photo. He picked it up and studied it. It was a picture of lean-faced Asian boy, early 20s if that, with thick black hair falling over his brow and a crooked smile. A younger girl had her arms around his neck, her chin on his shoulder, grinning at the camera. Lin Wei Long, Xui Li's missing brother. Something that he had started to look into just before the Klaus Zeller case had hit the fan and the dissertation exploded in his face.

He hadn't forgotten, not really. The day he left the PD he had tried to find Xui Li to tell her he wouldn't be around to help any more, but would ask Rhonda to put some pressure on Missing Persons for her. He knew Xui Li wouldn't have been happy with that response. Missing Persons had already come up with nothing. Wei Long's disappearance, together with that of his cousin, after taking up a new job, was small beer to them. He was just

another immigrant who had slipped out of the statistics, probably working in some black-market industry somewhere, but not necessarily at risk.

Blair distrusted this analysis, but nevertheless there was not much he could do now, with his PD access removed. He never found Xui Li that day, although he had passed on a message to one of her cleaning staff colleagues. Just another person he had let down while trying to do the right thing. Story of his life.

He slipped the photo back amongst the papers again and was just about to gather everything up when a shadow fell across the laptop screen. He looked up to see a slight young man in a dark suit standing over him.

"Hey, man, the table's yours," he said pleasantly. Snap went the laptop and everything was stuffed into his backpack. The man stayed where he was.

Blair glanced him again, then his eye was caught by the Al-Maghrib's staff, who had immediately assumed positions of extreme professionalism and attention to detail. They probably thought IRS, and, to be fair, thought Blair, he would have thought the same, had his adventures with Jim Ellison not brought him into contact with a worse class of customer.

FBI, without a doubt.

The man cleared his throat.

"Mr Sandburg..."

Blair didn't stop moving.

"Got the wrong man, no Sandburgs here."

"Mr Sandburg, Agent Cameron sends his regards."

Blair bent to gather up his coat.

"Sorry, man, you must be confusing me with some guy who knows what the hell you're talking about."

Jacket on, he was out of there.

Then the other man took his hand from his jacket pocket and dropped a photo on the small table. The face that stared out was the same as that on Blair's own snapshot - Lin Wei Long.

"Mr Sandburg, my name is Zuckerman. We need to talk."

\*

Jim Ellison regarded the receiver in his hand with indecision. He could ring again, maybe. Actually say something of importance this time, actually tell Blair the things that were

cutting his sleep short, tonight and every night, and leaving him sweating in his hotel bed, staring wild-eyed at the ceiling.

Not Steven, though God knows his brother irritated the hell out of him right now with his cavalier attitude to their father's condition and his own preoccupation with getting out of hospital and back to his own life as fast as possible, leaving Jim in the lurch. Easy to see now where the maternal genes had ended up.

Not his own injury, sustained in the pursuit of Klaus Zeller. If the enforced trip to Spain had done one thing, it had allowed his body time to rest and heal while he hung around hospital corridors, and the regime of exercises he was putting himself through in the dead hours between doctors' visits were strengthening weakened muscles. He was now pretty much back to his normal fitness.

It wasn't even his father, and his father was a genuine worry. Suddenly very frail and anxious, William Ellison was a long way from his usual self-containment, and he was uncharacteristically needy for his son's attention. Not that Jim wasn't keen to help his father – the sudden demonstration of fallibility made him very conscious of his father's advancing years and his filial responsibilities. But two sons existed and Steven's commitments could go to hell because as soon as Jim could organise things, and Steven was in a wheelchair and armed with a telephone, he was on a plane back to Cascade. The waiting was eating him up inside.

Because Jim had been seeing Blair in Spain.

Not really Blair, of course. Not a face, sometimes not even a glimpse of the whole body. Just a young man weaving through a crowd, dark hair brushing shoulders, tatty jeans, ratty backpack. By the time Jim would be ready to call out, ready to run and grab him, he would disappear again. Which was just as well because it wasn't Blair, was it? Just a scrawny hippie and a dog.

Yeah, the dog was the real freak-out. So there was some tourist in Spain with the same appalling dress sense as Sandburg? Big deal. But loping alongside this guy would be a dog. A big dog – German Shepherd or something like. All pricked ears and lolling tongue in the heat. Like a wolf, like a wolf.

And the dog would look at him. He never saw the kid's face but the dog would turn and look and hold his gaze and he was just waiting for the blue light to descend and the dog to start mouthing off something Sandburgian in sepulchral tones.

No, he couldn't joke about this. Seeing the spirit wolf, or what he took as some canine proxy, felt to him like a sure sign of something bad. Why couldn't he see the man's face? Why was the ghost always walking away from him, never turning to look, but the dog was always eyeballing him? It was sending him some kind of message though, he was convinced.

At the most basic level that message seemed like "Can you see him walking away? Because that's what's happening; he's walking away."

Jesus, listen to yourself. You're losing it, Ellison. You sound like some sappy daytime soap opera.

But what Sandburg said, or had not said, on the phone had reinforced that feeling of dread in him, and he continued to stare clear-eyed at the ceiling until the day broke and he could head to the hospital again to battle with its bureaucracy, now with an even greater sense of urgency.

## Chapter 5

Early evening, and the Golden Pagoda was only half full of customers, but it was a rainy Tuesday so what would you expect? The patrons were all Chinese, itself an excellent recommendation of the food on offer, although the grimy front window and Formica tables did nothing for ambiance. Blair's stomach rumbled as quite delectable aromas from the kitchen assailed his nose. He had a little inward chuckle as he imagined how conflicted his friend Jim Ellison would be at the prospect of eating there – would that overdeveloped sense of cleanliness be trumped by a Sentinel's appreciation of the mouth-watering smell, and the man's inner glutton prevail? He pushed the image away. No point in wishing the guy were there, Sandburg was flying solo on this one.

He turned to the young waiter who approached him.

"Is Xui Li here?"

Before the man could reply there was a yelp from beyond the counter and a pretty girl emerged from where she had been stacking glasses.

"San'bur! San'bur!"

Xui Li grabbed his arm and before he knew it he had been pushed through swing doors into the busy kitchen. The air was filled with sizzling and chopping and muted orders. Xui Li propelled Blair into a far corner where a harrassed middle-aged man was tending to bubbling saucepans.

"San'bur, my father. Look, father! San'bur came! San'bur came! I knew he would!"

Blair looked at her closely. Behind the bright smile, Xui Li's pretty face was drawn with worry. Her father, reserved and silent, had the same air of strain that had nothing to do with his laborious job.

Please God, Blair thought, don't let me screw this up, too.



A few minutes later the three of them were seated at a table in the rear of the restaurant with a pot of green tea between them. Blair sipped appreciatively as he listened to the story again. It was essentially the one that Xui Li had first told him at the PD, when she had cornered him and asked his help. And he'd been concerned enough to start making a few enquiries and talking to Jim about the possibilities when the dissertation crisis had banished everything else from his thoughts. Now he felt a need reawaken to try to do something for this family; there was a fair amount of guilt, too, that their concern had ended up being neglected.

Xui Li, and to a lesser extent her father, clearly a taciturn man, took him through the facts again. Xui Li and most of her immediate family had finally made it to the United States 18 months previously. They were legitimate immigrants, but obtaining the correct papers for entry by using some of the many black market fixers who preyed on people desperate to start a new life had been of phenomenal cost for an ordinary Chinese family. Xui Li juggled various menial jobs in the city, cleaning at the PD being one of them, and she also worked in the Golden Pagoda. Her father had joined them more recently and worked there full-time. Wei Long and Feng, their cousin, had also started by working at the restaurant. But although the Golden Pagoda was associated with a distant relation, her aunt's brother-in-law sister's cousin, as Xui Li explained, the black-marketeers had never really let them escape their clutches. There was still a huge amount of money to be paid back, and even with all family members working around the clock, the debt never seemed to diminish. Then three months previously, the fixers had made it clear that the payback schedule needed to be accelerated, and the only way the family could hope to meet that schedule was if Wei Long and Feng left to work directly for the immigrant labour gangmasters, in some other capacity elsewhere in the city. The young men had simply left one day with one of the gangmasters and the family had heard nothing since. The fixers had no intention of telling Xui Li or her father anything, and all attempts they had made to get help – Xui Li's first visit to the Missing Persons Bureau, for instance – had resulted in late-night visits from the gangmasters' bully-boys who warned them off. Hence Xui Li had turned, unofficially, to Blair.

While he listened to the story, Blair had been playing idly with the picture of Wei Long he had been given. Xui Li now produced a similar snap of Feng – again, a fairly non-descript young Chinese man. They were just two boys who had disappeared into the black economy of the city.

“Xui Li, I can't promise anything. You know I'm not officially with the PD any more. I can't use those channels.”

Maybe the furore surrounding his late career hadn't really percolated down to the level of the PD's hard-working "casual" employees, as he saw some of the hope die in her eyes while he explained the ineffectiveness of his position. But nevertheless she provided him with more names and details, explaining the intricacies of the gangmaster system and the

methods of extortion, the regularity of visits, and the amount of payments, and he recorded them all, gravely polite, but privately enraged at the catalogue of misery they entailed.

\*

It was maybe 8.30pm when he left the restaurant. It was still raining, the cars swishing across slick asphalt, and the coloured lights of the various Chinese restaurants in the area reflecting brightly in the puddles. He walked a little way, taking care to assess whether anyone was following him, but after a while concluded that no one on a wet Tuesday night was interested in a slightly bedraggled former anthropologist who had simply been for Chinese meal.

Another block ahead and he turned into a smoky bar, so unremarkable it didn't even have a name. Inside, a neat and precise young man in a dark suit and with a faint air of distaste on his features was waiting at one of the sticky tables. He looked ridiculously conspicuous in the miserable surroundings, but thankfully most punters seemed more interested in sinking as much alcohol as possible to take any notice.

Blair sat down heavily at an adjoining stool.

"Well, I went to see them, like you asked. The Lin family have no more news. Wei Long and Feng are still missing. You know I can't make any inroads using their contacts. I don't know how they work, and I'd sure as hell stick out like a sore thumb, being, you know, the only Jew on the team, present company excepted. So where does that leave us?"

Zuckerman pushed a glass towards him. The beer tasted warm and flat – the FBI man must have been waiting for him some time.

"That's why we need to use a different route, Mr Sandburg. The gangmasters are ten a penny, sadly. Take one down and there are others to jump in his place."

Blair nodded grimly. That fact had been very apparent whenever he and Jim had run across those kinds of operators in the past.

Blair sipped the beer. Zuckerman seemed to be happy to sit and wait. He thought back to their conversation earlier that evening.

"You asked me to talk to the Lins again. I have. You asked whether I still wanted to help. I do. But I still don't see how things have changed, and how I could achieve anything."

Zuckerman nodded.

"The Bureau has been looking into the movement of black market labour in the North West for some time. It usually involves operators across at least several states, moving both people and money, together with possible other contraband. Obviously there's an international connection too. But we haven't been getting very far with Cascade itself."

He looked at Blair to check he had the man's attention.

"People tend to look on these setups as roughly ethnic in their organisation, but in reality there is plenty of cross-over. Black-market labour is big business, so no reason, say, to restrict your portfolio to Chinese labour, or Eastern European, or Latin American."

Blair swigged some of his bland beer. It was sour in his throat.

"Bastards. And you know, people think slavery ended in the nineteenth century."

"Indeed, Mr Sandburg."

"So, where does that leave me? And Wei Long and his cousin?"

"We've been trying to trace some of the transport runs. Usually, this is pretty difficult. Communities are very tightly knit so there are few chances of getting an informant. So generally we don't know about the shipments of labour until they've taken place. It's then of course even more difficult to follow where they've ended up. Nevertheless in most cities we have some element of success, but in Cascade it's like people disappear into thin air. We've been getting nowhere. But then something strange happened."

Zuckerman took a sip of his beer, made a face and replaced the glass on the table, pushing it away from him in distaste.

"About three months ago nearly all the transport runs were suspended. The gangmasters went very quiet. We could get no information from the various communities, but we knew from our own connections with the PD that you and Detective Ellison had coincidentally started to ask questions about Wei Long..."

"Hang on," snapped Blair, suddenly suspicious, "What do you mean, your own connections? You've seen our files?"

Zuckerman smiled, a little sheepishly.

"Surely, Mr Sandburg, you've realised by now that if the Bureau needs information from the Police there are always ways we can get it. Let's just say, we became aware of your interest in some of the gangmasters. So, the labour runs were suspended. And this suspension of activity went on until about ten days ago."

He paused, as if for effect. Blair looked at him quizzically.

"Ten days?"

"When you and Detective Ellison were no longer on the scene. This combination of factors seems to us to help explain how difficult we find it to make inroads into gangmaster operations within Cascade. We suspect someone is protecting them at a higher level."

"Within the PD, you mean?"

"I think it's conceivable, yes."

Blair let those facts run around his brain for a moment or two.

"Well, that could explain a thing or two..." he murmured, more to himself than to Zuckerman.

"So I'm hoping that you might be prepared to assist us in getting to the bottom of these operations by taking up the role we discussed earlier this evening. We have a fair amount of confidence that it will lead us further into the black-market operations, and we feel you would be particularly suited to carrying it out. It's risky, of course. You would have some degree of back-up from me as your contact, but on the whole you would be on your own."

Blair stared blankly at the table. He didn't see the smeared wood and the beer stains. He saw Xui Li's unhappy, strained face; he saw Simon's office, without Simon in it, and his anxious co-workers; he saw Jim's anger and frustration at their treatment by Prentiss, and the crumbling of both their careers; he saw the Lonely Loft, and the empty road leading away from it.

Zuckerman spoke again.

"I expect you want some time to think about it."

This was crazy, thought Blair. If Jim were here they'd have an object lesson in 'talk to the hand' and a lecture on how half-assed, unsanctioned and dangerous the whole Zuckerman plan appeared to be. And Jim would be right, wouldn't he?

Blair looked up. There was the ghost of a smile on his mouth, a very bitter smile.

"No, Mr Zuckerman. I'll do it."

\*

"Stop! Please, stop!"

He was shouting, but the man was still walking away. This time, Jim was determined to catch him. He leapt down from the hotel terrace and dashed across the road, dodging between the traffic, and then stormed through the crowded plaza, pushing people aside, unheeding of their angry words and gestures. Running and running, the flagstones hot under his feet; but however hard he ran, he didn't seem to get any closer. He turned a corner at the edge of the square and into a dim lane. And now it was only the young man and the dog in view.

"Blair?"

He knew how desperate his voice sounded, but he didn't care now. In every fibre of his being he knew that Blair was leaving him behind. He had to get him to stay.

"Blair? Is that you?"

The figure paused, and bent down to the dog at his heels. The hound was gazing admiringly up at his master and the young man stroked the animal's ears gently. Then he lifted his head and looked straight at Jim.

It was Sandburg. It really was Sandburg.

Jim was filled with a sense of utter disaster, utter emptiness, so extreme he cried out in pain. He rushed towards his friend, who just stood there with a sad smile on his face.

"Blair, wait! Wait for me!"

But the young man turned again, opened a barely visible door in the stone wall beside him, and stepped through. Jim was left alone in the dim light with only the dog. And the dog ... it was no longer the goofy, loping German Shepherd. Its snout and teeth lengthened, its coat turned silver grey and it threw its head back and howled.

"No!" shouted Jim. "Bring him back!"

The wolf – for wolf it was - turned snarling, a yellow light in its eyes, and leapt for Jim's throat.



\*

"No!"

He was awake, bolt upright in bed, the sheets in disarray and soaked in sweat. His heart was pounding. Minutes passed before he could get his breathing under control. Eventually he looked at the alarm clock.

3 am. The same time as the night before, and the night before that...

It would be early evening in Cascade. He reached for the phone and dialled, and tried not be dispirited when the machine kicked in at the Loft.

"Chief, it's me." He struggled to keep his voice steady for the message. "Please ring me, I need to talk to you. It's been days. Look, I'm going to ring your cellphone now."

He broke the connection, redialled and listened for a moment. Frowning, he redialled again.

The fear that had been growing over the days and weeks was now settled in his gut like a block of ice. Now he knew. He knew with complete and awful certainty.

Faraway in Cascade, Blair's cellphone rang and rang and rang and rang.

No-one answered. And Jim knew now that nobody would.

## Chapter 6

"Hey, Brad, you're here early!"

"Well, I guess. I'm still finding my feet, you know."

Irene Ng gestured him into her office – if you could call it that, a boxroom really, with a desk crammed against one wall – and sat down at said piece of furniture. She prised open her take-out coffee cup.

"You're doing fine, you know. This isn't Harvard. We just do a processing job. Give them the basics and let them go."

The young man leant against the door frame, looking troubled. Shame, she thought, that face was made to be smiling. Such a pretty boy.

"Sit down, Brad," she smiled winningly at him. "Relax before the daily grind. It's about time we got to know each other a little better anyway." She traced a pattern on the desk with her rather sharp, red nail.

He sat, placing his backpack carefully beside him. She sensed he was building up courage to speak to her. She knew she was a strikingly attractive woman, the delicacy of her elegant Oriental face contrasting tantalisingly with the overlay of Western toughness. She had been waiting for this halting advance from the pretty boy. A big fat zero for sophistication, but she reckoned that there were bonus points to be had once some of those many clothing layers had been removed...

She waited. The young man ran a hand slightly self-consciously over his short curls. Nice colour, she noted, not for the first time. And he had an ear that showed piercings. Quite the world citizen, our Brad Somerby. Unfortunately for her, the conversation took an unexpected turn.

"What I can't work out, Irene, is why the classes change so much. I mean, I understand we're only contracted by the City to provide very basic English language instruction, but some of the students, they don't last more than a few days. Sometimes it's only a day. And yet there's never an empty seat, you know. Like... it's like there's a never-ending stream and the people who don't turn up are just forgotten."

Irene Ng's smile became slightly brittle, but she covered her annoyance well.

"You're right about the never-ending stream, Brad. There are such a lot of new immigrants who need the basic language skills."

"Yeah, but a day? Doesn't the City contract us for a two-week course?"

Irene narrowed her eyes.

"It's a very flexible system, Brad. People can dodge in and out of the classes, you know."

Brad Somerby shrugged his shoulders.

"But in three weeks, I've not seen anyone come back after they've left. Sometimes I get the same family in one week, a different individual every time."

He looked down at the ratty carpet, rubbing his brow. Irene snapped the lid back on her coffee.

"You know, Brad," she said, shuffling some papers on her desk busily, "we do the best we can. We aren't responsible for these people. We aren't enforcers. If they choose not to come to class that there's not much we can do about it. However, if this is quick turnaround troubles you, then maybe you aren't as suited to this job as we thought."

She looked up sharply, prepared to fix him with one of her best gimlet stares. And... what the hell? The little bastard was grinning at her!

"Had you going, huh?"

She refused to show she was rattled.

"What's your point, Brad," she snapped.

Brad Somerby stretched out his legs and crossed his trainer-clad feet.

"Come on, Irene. It's not hard to see you're working a nice little scam here. The City contracts you for so many students, you put those many butts in the seats. Doesn't really matter they don't learn anything, does it?"

He had such a wicked smile, she realised.

"I can assure you...."

He waved a hand airily.

"Don't sweat it, Irene. I don't care what you're pulling here. I just thought maybe I could help."

"There's really nothing...."

"Wondered why those referees I gave you are slow to respond?"

Irene frowned at the sudden change of tack. It was true that the referees Brad Somerby had provided were hard to confirm, though to be honest she only followed them up for form's sake, to help reinforce the impression that hers was a bona fide language school. Whether her new employee indeed had the stated skills in social sciences and humanities was a low priority for her.

"I'll put you out of your misery, shall I? The best you'll get from them will be a vague confirmation that I worked in those institutions. Truth is, I left Texas under something of a cloud." He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward conspiratorially in his chair.

"You see, Irene, I was kind of a naughty boy. Kind of got a bit too close to a few of my students, had a little too much fun. You know what I mean? And my problem is, well, those girls looked way older than their years."

He sat back in his chair again, still grinning. Irene kept her composure.

"So you see, Irene, here I am, an intelligent man, good at my job but with one or two blemishes on my record which mean my main area of employment nowadays is shit jobs like this one. So I thought to myself, if this is now my level, might as well be the best that I can be. Huh?"

"Brad, I really don't know what you're implying about this company."

"Oh, spare me, Irene. It's pretty clear to me you're operating a sweet little scam. Well done, more power to you."



He suddenly slapped a hand to his forehead.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't think this through! You think I'm gonna blackmail you or something? Put pressure on? No, no, no, Irene! Not my style at all. Really, I just thought that as I've worked out what's going on and, let's face it, we've both got a bit to hide, I could be more help than just spouting English grammar at your rent-a-crowd. Whatcha think?"

He waved his hand around the office.

"This must take a bit of organising, all these groups, and I guess you maybe have connections where these guys work, so that needs to be sorted out, the right people smoothed over, the right paybacks made. Am I right, or am I right?"

Irene sat back in her chair and smiled her own version of the wicked smile.

"You got a death wish, Brad? This sector is run by some very heavy people. They don't like being messed with, and neither do I."

"Hey, win-win here! You get an attractive, able Man Friday and I get better job security. Maybe if I'm really good, you might pay me a little more. And you know, Irene," the grin was back, a dark eyebrow arched over it, "I'm really good."

Irene studied him for a moment. The gauche, superannuated grad student look had gone. The pretty face was hard, the eyes calculating. Okay, this could work out well; if it didn't, there were plenty of ways Mr Brad Somerby could disappear from the scene in due course.

"Good, huh?" She gave him her smoothest voice. "I'll be the judge of that."

## Chapter 7

Simon Banks looked on uneasily from his couch while the jet-lagged, roaring headcase formerly known as Jim Ellison paced his lounge floor, alternately waving his arms around and running his hands violently over his already receding hair.

Guy gonna be bald by nightfall at this rate.

"I just don't understand it, Simon. What was he thinking of? Why has he done this, just snuck out? Where the hell is he?"

Jim's mental process hadn't moved on much in the twenty minutes since he'd hammered on Simon's door at 8am, clearly just off the plane, via the Loft. He'd barely answered Simon's enquiries about his father's health, though Simon had managed to piece together that after three weeks, the hospital had deemed that Ellison senior's condition was not as

immediately serious as first thought, and consequently he was well enough to take the plane home, at his own risk. Jim had left Steven, now hobbling around, to sort the details.

It was clear to Simon, observing his friend's state of mind, that these matters were the least of his worries, and that Jim had returned from Spain as soon as he had been able, driven by a deep unease about how things were back in Cascade. Blair's letter, read by Jim out loud to a shocked and faintly embarrassed Banks, was Jim's confirmation that those things were in an in an even worse state than he'd thought.

"Jim, you keep saying this. I told you, I don't know, okay? I don't know where he is. He told me three weeks ago that he was going travelling, that you knew all about it, encouraged him. He was going to hook up with some excavation going on in Colombia that a friend is running."

"And two weeks ago in Madrid I got a post card – a postcard! – from Big Sur that said he was at an ashram in California with Naomi, mobile phones were banned there, and he'd be back in a fortnight."

Simon held up his hands at Jim's thunderous expression.

"Look Jim, I've just repeated what he told me, I'm not making this up. I had no reason to suspect any different. So he's sold us different stories. Given the shit you two went through I'm not too surprised he might have wanted to duck out for a while. After all, you had your dad to take care of...."

Simon trailed off when Jim, who had had been leaning over a chair, head hanging, suddenly turned back to face him, and Simon saw such pain in his eyes he had to look away.

"We were going to sort it, Simon! I promised him. Why couldn't he have waited? And what the hell has he got himself into?"

"Should we try to contact Naomi, to be sure?"

"Oh, I called as soon as I got back to the Loft this morning. Naomi Sandburg's at the ashram, all right. They were happy to confirm that. But not Blair Sandburg."

Jim sat down heavily on the couch beside Simon, head in hands. After a few moments, Simon patted him gingerly on the shoulder.

"Look, Jim, where he's gone I can't tell you. Maybe he really did go on a dig, or he changed his mind last minute and went to an ashram somewhere. Maybe that's what that letter means."

Jim lifted his head and gave him an unbelieving look.

“Look at the letter. If it was just a dig, or a retreat, why be so cryptic? Why tell us different stories, unless he was too screwed-up to concentrate properly, or he was deliberately confusing his trail? There's far more to it all than that, Simon.”

Banks picked up the letter – a piece of legal pad – and scanned it.

Jim,

I've made sure the utility bills are up-to-date. Clean out of food. You'll have to shop - sorry. My stuff's in the basement, no one should know it's there and I can always move it later if you want.

It's IMPORTANT I do this, for both of us. And I will be back. I promise. We'll talk about it then. You should get some news later.

PLEASE don't try and find me, Jim. I want you to be safe. Please keep your head down and DIAL EVERYTHING DOWN, that should keep you out of trouble. You know what I mean.

I'll be in touch as soon as I can. But I need to do this.

Love you, man.

Blair

PS Hope yr dad and S are okay.

Simon reflected. Yeah, it was far too cryptic to be a simple “gone digging up bones” or “gone meditating” letter. Sandburg's worry and urgency fairly leapt off the page. Simon had felt strangely embarrassed when Jim had read the letter to him first, perhaps more because it was such an uncharacteristic Jim Ellison thing to do, than on account of the letter's contents. Now, reading it for himself, he decoded the message by seeing what the words didn't say rather than what they did. And he couldn't help but feel a blip of amusement that Blair's written instructions, with their underlining and capital letters, were very like the verbal versions.

Simon tried again with Jim, who was back to pacing.

“Yeah, okay, I agree. It sounds worryingly like he's gone off on a mission all of his own. What it is, I have no idea, seriously, but as to why, I don't think you maybe have the full picture. We've barely spoken since you went to Spain, what with the time difference, and I kind of expected Blair would have briefed you on what happened after you left. I guess it looks like he didn't.”

Jim stopped pacing and looked hard at Simon.

"What you mean? What else happened?" he said, a dangerous edge to his voice. Simon started to feel slightly as if he were a suspect under interrogation.

"Having to leave the Loft. You'd flown off so you were out of it, but there was heavy pressure applied. I know, as some of that pressure was being applied to me."

"What the hell are you talking about, Simon? He didn't have to leave the Loft! It's his home! What haven't you told me?"

Simon was now a mite tired of being the punchbag. He stood up, drawing himself up to his full height, and stared Jim down.

"That's enough, Detective. I'm not the bad guy in this, so can the attitude. Sit down. I'll make you a coffee, and you will listen to me. And then we can work out what Sandburg has actually told you."

Jim failed to sit down. Instead he followed his friend fairly meekly into the kitchen where Simon busied himself with mugs and the percolator.

"We've none of us had the time to piece this all together," mused Simon, extracting creamer from a cupboard. "So let's just sort out all the facts."

He placed the mugs on the worktop and pulled some spoons out of a drawer. Jim sat down heavily on a stool and stared at the cutlery.

"One, we have a new Commissioner who is keen to throw his weight around. And that Commissioner seems to have a pretty focused agenda, involving Major Crimes.

"Two, I'm still on obligatory sick leave, in theory because I failed to take the requisite amount of time to 'recover from my injuries'... ", Simon emphasised his sarcasm with elaborate air-quotes... "which means I'm in breach of Personnel Department rules. In reality, I can see this as a blocking process, stopping me going back to my job. And the more I protest, the more difficult it gets.

"Three, I know from our guys that since I've been out of that office, there's been a lot of direction and prohibition coming from on high. Push this case, go easy on that one, don't get in the way here, and so on and so on."

The percolator had perked, bubbling its last. Simon felt a little more human as the delicious aroma pervaded the kitchen. He poured generous mug-fulls and pushed the creamer towards Jim, who had by now lifted his head and was staring thoughtfully at him.

"I thought Bellwood was an okay cop," said Jim. "By reputation, anyway. No hotshot, but he seemed a competent Captain, if one with a stick up his ass."

"Bellwood's a career captain. I've never heard anything bad inferred about his honesty, but he's pretty quick to take instruction. Go for an easy life. With a pushy Commissioner's office, he'll be quick to roll over."

Simon took a sip of coffee, then another, and revelled in the feeling of it topping up his bloodstream.

"Anyway, back to the facts. Four, Sandburg is excluded from the PD, no ifs or buts. Nominally it's because of the bad publicity over the Zeller case, and..." Simon hesitated, "...you know, the 'S' word."

Jim flinched.

"But the 'official displeasure' crap has been overdone here. God knows Sandburg can be an annoying little runt, but the PD by and large is downright delighted he's around. No-one with a real concern for crime-solving results would want to break up a team like you and him. But it looks like someone has a keen interest in doing exactly that."

Simon sipped again.

"Whoever it is, they must have been rubbing their hands when you went to Spain. No offence to your dad, Jim, but it got you right out of the picture. And it was then very easy to put more pressure on Sandburg."

Simon raised a hand to ward off Jim's interruption.

"They told me the same day they told you. Not only was Sandburg out, pronto, but that he had to quit being your roommate. He was a 'destructive influence' and the Commissioner wanted him gone."

Jim was spluttering now.

"Yes, Jim, I know, I know. Discrimination, victimisation, the lot. I guess he didn't tell you right away, what with you worried about your dad. He let you go to Spain not knowing. Maybe if you'd been here from the off, you both would have been able to make a stand. But on his own ... and I've been worse than useless to you - persona non grata with the PD."

Simon refilled his mug. Jim had hardly touched his.

"The thing is, and Sandburg told me this himself, he gave me the rundown on what happened in Bellwood's office after you left – they claim it's not a homophobic thing...."

"What? We're not...!"

"No, no, okay, I know, what I mean is, they aren't implying that. They just said that if Sandburg didn't butt out of everyone's lives then your job would suffer. He was very clear about that. Sandburg said it was an out-and-out threat to your career, and indirectly to me

and potentially the rest of Major Crimes as well. That's why he started packing up and looking for somewhere to rent. He told me he'd have the fight with you when you came home. He didn't want to leave, Jim. I could tell that. But he was seriously worried about the threat. So when later he told me he was off on a dig I wasn't surprised he felt the need to get away."

Jim stared at his hands.

"Okay, I kind of get why he stormed off – though he and I are going to have words later, Goddamn him. Why couldn't he have waited, Simon? And we still don't know where he is, and what the hell he's doing out there."

"Jim, do what he asks. Sit tight, keep your head down. We need to get political to beat the politicos, and going at it bull-at-a-gate isn't going to help."

"This is Sandburg, Simon. He can get neck-deep in shit without even trying. He needs help!"

"You underestimate him, Jim. He was a capable man long before he met you."

But Jim was shaking his head violently.

"No, no, you don't understand. I know he's at risk, Simon. I can tell."

Simon huffed.

"Jim, I know you're worried, but leave off the melodrama, okay? You can't tell he's in trouble. Even a Sentinel can't tell that..." Simon paused doubtfully. "Can you?"

Jim got up to pace again.

"I've been dreaming about him, Simon."

Simon almost dropped his mug. Jim caught his aghast expression.

"No, no, I don't mean those sorts of dreams. Just.... about the spirit animals - you remember, yeah? And Blair's unhappy, and he's walking away, disappearing."

"Anxiety dreams, Jim."

"No. I know enough about this now to take notice of them when it happens. If those dreams say Blair's in trouble, then he is."

The kitchen fell silent. And Simon could find nothing comforting to say.

## Chapter 8

This time, Blair was there first. The tables were just as dirty, the clientele likewise. The beer was just the same warm, weak piss, and he told Zuckerman so when the other man, disconcertingly dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt in an obvious attempt to 'blend in', joined him at the table.

"Could we not, at least, meet somewhere where the beer is actually drinkable?"

"I'd rather not shift rendezvous, Brad. This is a good location."

Blair sighed heavily at the pointed use of his cover name and made an effort to drink something, as a means of preserving that cover. It was hard not to make a face, though.

"So," said Zuckerman. "What's the latest position?"

Blair pushed his glass away from him.

"Irene is having more meetings with the Lutsevich guy. I think they go back a-ways. She's been working for him some time. You know that so far we've been moving at least four shipments of Chinese each week, anywhere from 5 to 15 people per batch. Once the language school processes them, they go out to the various gangmasters for work. Now Lutsevich wants Irene to take on more, this time East Europeans. Irene has told him that mixing up classes isn't good for cover, but Lutsevich just told her to deal with it. We have to up our game and process faster. It means a lot of paperwork but, fuck, there's a lot of money wrapped up in all this. The City still doesn't have a clue, and keeps paying Irene on the dot. So the pressure is on to make sure we can deal with the extras Lutsevich wants and not be seen to falter in making payment claims, etcetera, etcetera. Irene is pretty glad of my help by now."

He smirked a bit to himself at that. Zuckerman appeared unamused.

"How many more does Lutsevich want to bring in?"

"I think another three or four shipments, so doubling what we do now. But I don't think Cascade Premier Language School is the only process point. It's too sweet a scam for this not to be a larger affair, and Lutsevich's gangmasters seem to have an unlimited appetite for labour. From what Irene hints, I think Lutsevich has just won a turf battle with another operator, hence the increase in numbers we're going to be dealing with, and the fact that we're now going to be getting East European migrants."

He smiled grimly.

"Heh, a real multinational enterprise."

Zuckerman sipped his beer, winced and hurriedly replaced the glass on the table.

"What you say certainly ties in with what we know about moves among the larger operators. There was some nasty work at the docks a few nights ago. Lots of bodies."

"Yeah, I heard. The news is saying gangsters and drug lords. But it ties in with Lutsevich's plan to up the ante."

Zuckerman nodded.

"We need more details about where the migrants are distributed. Clearly not all of them stay within the City, or even the State. The East European angle may help us join up the dots between the gangmasters and the linchpins who are driving the market."

Blair dug in his pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper covered in scribbles.

"I'm in the office most days and Irene's laptop is pretty easy to hack. Though actually most of the data is in plain sight. These..." he twisted up the piece of paper and dropped it by his glass "... are the names of the East Side gangmasters, the men who are going to be taking the bulk of the new people, and the business covers they're using. We need this stuff anyway for the City funding claims; it adds a vague authenticity - ha, ha - to the jobs these guys are moving into. Of course the fronts are merely fronts, and the people themselves end up in some nameless squat somewhere being herded from one sweatshop or one building site to another, day-to-day."

Zuckerman reached for his glass and picked up the piece of paper at the same time.

"This is good, Brad, but it doesn't take us much further on..."

"Jesus, you're a hard man, Bob, and an impatient one. I was going to add..."

Blair gave Zuckerman a scathing look.

"... that the stuff that Irene doesn't necessarily want me to see is actually fairly easy to get into. It doesn't kind of leap off the page at you, but what you can see from the language school class movements - which we have to keep tabs on to keep making bogus claims for the funding - is that bunches of people get hived off on a regular basis, and don't appear again on the gangmaster details. They're always young males, anywhere from late teens to early 30s. These guys seem to go straight to Lutsevich. From the profile you'd expect them to end up on building sites or as warehouse labour, but I don't think they do. On the records, all they have is an 'X' beside their name, and we don't claim for them. And that's suspicious in itself, considering that Irene claims for every living thing she can, practically foetuses. Once I'd spotted the records, I did some backtracking. Guess whose names I found?"

He paused for effect, went to take a sip of beer and stopped himself just in time. Zuckerman looked expectantly at him.



"Lin Wei Long, and Lin Feng."

Zuckerman almost smiled.

"Very good. Oh, very good, Brad. This is a real breakthrough. With the specifics, we can track forward to where they got to, and back to find out who's been protecting Lutsevich's operations."

"Yep, and the families of those 'specifics' are going to be pleased that we've actually tracked them down," Blair added acidly.

Zuckerman frowned at him.

"No contact with the Lins is possible, you know that."

"Yeah, yeah. I just thought, eventually, you know. Maybe we might even find these boys alive and well. It's just..."

He sighed heavily.

"Lutsevich is a brutal bastard. That much has been obvious from the small dealings I've had with him so far. And if he's been responsible for that bloodbath at the docks the other night, then he's..." Blair's voice tailed off.

"... I worry about those boys."

He gestured vaguely at Zuckerman's beer.

"On that paper, another thing. There's details of Cascade Premier's company filings. Have a look at the reference numbers, will you? This may be wishful thinking on my part, but if this goes all the way to the top, then somewhere in the company registration history may be a link to wherever the top actually is. It won't be obvious, of course, but I guess you Bureau guys have ... 'resources' ... you can use?"

Zuckerman nodded, apparently oblivious to Blair's jibe.

"I can certainly have a look at that. In the meantime, I'd like you to try to get closer to Lutsevich's operation. It will mean getting involved with the East European angle, probably at the docks. See if you can make yourself as indispensable to him as you are to Irene." He tried, and failed, to smirk.

"And...?" said Blair, pointedly.

"And what?"

"What about your end of the bargain. What's happening at the PD?"

Zuckerman looked somewhat uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, Brad, but I can't move overtly on this and consequently it's hard to make progress. Captain Banks is still on sick leave, and I believe the Police Union are helping with his case, but it's not a swift process. Detective Ellison has just been catching up with paperwork so far..."

"What?" Blair snapped. "Jim's back home? And you didn't tell me?"

"Four days ago, Brad. Nothing untoward has been happening. I thought it could wait until our meet."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Blair's tone was icy.

"There is to be no communication, Brad. You know that."

"Yes, but the deal was that you and your 'contacts' at the PD would keep an eye on him. And that you would let him know what's happening, so that he understands to keep clear, and..." Blair cleared his throat, "... and that I'm okay."

"Brad, I need to wait for the right opportunity for that."

"Bullshit! Deal with it now! I don't want Jim compromised by this, or put in a risky position."

"Okay, okay, calm down! It'll be done, Brad. I promise."

"You better, or this deal's off, you hear? Now, are we done here?"

"Next meet here in four days, or text the number if there's something vital. And wait ten minutes after I've gone..."

"Fuck you," hissed Blair, standing up. "You can wait the ten minutes. Check out the TV – there's a Jags game on. That'll help pass the time. I'll see you in four days, and by then I want an update on Jim!"

The swing door did not hit him on his way out.

\*

Blair walked hard and fast, covering the distance between the rendezvous and his apartment in record time. He distractedly kept an eye open for anyone tailing him but, frankly, he couldn't have given a damn just then. Reaching his address, a new high-rise close to the financial district, he launched himself up three flights of stairs, threw open the door and hurled his backpack across the room. Then he slammed the door behind him and for a few minutes just leant against it, breathing heavily, fighting back waves of emotion that were as intense as they were unexpected.

Jim. Jim back in Cascade. He hadn't known, hadn't sensed it. He had felt that somehow he should have been able to detect Jim's presence; foolish, he knew, but it was disappointing

to him to know that the mystical bond he felt with his Sentinel – though he would avoid calling it that in front of Jim – didn't manifest itself in more emotionally satisfying or, frankly, more useful ways.

Now Jim was back and Blair wasn't anywhere finished with this little undercover caper of his own. It was essential that Jim was kept out of it – Blair couldn't afford the risk either to his friend's personal safety or to his career, should the PD find out. Bringing Jim into the mix would be a complication right now he could do without.

But it wasn't just that. He had quit the bar that night like the hounds of hell were after him because the sudden news had thrown him for a loop. Partly it was anger and anxiety that so disturbed his mind; but other things were there, things he had rarely encountered in his past, despite his well-cultured image of self-sufficiency, but where Jim Ellison was concerned he now found to be an essential and growing part of his life – excitement, joy, and a kind of ... longing. That was the most disturbing and bemusing element of it all, he reflected - the sudden lurch to his heart on finding Jim was back, in the same city, walking the same streets and breathing the same air. If he was being truthful with himself, it was a sort of heady fear.

He crossed the wide living area towards the dark windows. He hated this place. It was a rental belonging to some friend of Irene's and he could hardly have turned down the offer considering the goodwill he wanted to cultivate with his shady employer and the fact that she had made sure the rent was low. But to him, the apartment was funded by blood money. He was pretty sure Irene's friend was in a similar line of work, exploiting yet more poor and unprotected families, and the need to live in the surroundings made him feel sick. It was a feeling he had had to squash down inside himself every day to get on with the pretence of being Brad Somerby, but right now it surged back up, along with all those hopes and anxieties and... and... all this stuff about him and Jim that he had forced himself to ignore each day while he worked towards his objective.

But he couldn't control his subconscious. Many nights he had awoken from dreams of the Loft and Jim – of home and security, warmth and friendship – to feel isolated and cold in his borrowed life. Now Jim was within reaching distance, and the desire to see him was almost too much to bear.

But he couldn't. It would have to wait. When all this was over, he and Jim would sit down and talk, really talk, because there were things that Blair needed to know, and he realised now that those things would determine whether he walked away from his life with Jim, or back toward it. Until then, though, all he could do was wait, and hope that Jim stayed well clear.

Blair kicked his backpack aside and leant with his forehead against the cold windowpane, staring out across the lights of Cascade, and searching vainly for those that glowed in 852 Prospect.

\*

Way across town, in the cool spring night, Jim Ellison stood on the balcony of his darkened apartment leaning back against the wall. He threw out his senses in a forlorn attempt to find any trace of Blair Sandburg. Something told him that Blair, whatever he was doing, was still in the city. But with no clues, his senses spiralled uselessly out into the void. Cascade spoke to him, in all her many voices and emotions; the machines, the people, the shouts and the sighs. If he had wanted to, he could have heard them all. But there was only one voice he was interested in, and it eluded him.

His head hurt and his shoulders were knotted with tension. It has been one hell of a week. First, coming off the red-eye to find a deserted Loft and that note on the table, then Simon's revelations - all that had seemed to confirm what his strange dreams had been telling him. He felt disorientated and disturbed – fatigue didn't help, no doubt, but it went deeper than mere jetlag. Even his first brief appearance at Major Crimes, before he had been unceremoniously told by Bellwood to go home and get some sleep, had allowed him to see for himself how wary, jittery, or just plain pissed were most of his colleagues.

The past few days had only consolidated that first impression. Now, as every evening, he found that returning home to the dark Loft – no sense of Sandburg, no warmth, no light – only increased his feeling of distress. He tried to do necessary chores but instead found himself wandering through the rooms, spotting where things had been, staring at blank spaces as if by mere concentration he could make them, and Blair, come back again. If only....

Oh, this had happened before, God knew. He'd thrown Blair out himself, in the middle of a confused and angry crisis, and then alienated his friend again not months later when he had felt Blair had been prioritising his own interests over Jim's privacy and their friendship. He had been wrong, of course, so wrong; but he'd never spoken freely to Sandburg about it all, never confessed his fears nor expressed his sorrow at hurting his friend so much – the friend who had given up everything for him, his life included.

Right now, Jim was consumed with the need to talk to that friend, and tell him all those fears. They could have done it months ago, even weeks ago, on their own terms, but not now. Now matters were being driven by forces outside his control.

He stared out into the dark. Only one thing for it; time to take that control right back.

## Chapter 9

Jim sat at his desk with his head in his hands. He was staring down at an open file he was nominally reviewing; in fact he saw nothing on the page. He was fully focused on his mind's eye, where the world of his most recent dreams was resurfacing to terrify and haunt him.

In the three weeks since his return, he had pretty much functioned on auto-pilot. The nagging worry of Blair's disappearance, and the reason behind it, was ever-present to be fretted over. But more than that, it was as though the further Blair was apart from him physically, the more his subconscious filled the gap.

His nights were filled with dreams. The wolf-dog had still been skirting the boundaries of his thoughts, but increasingly Blair himself was centre-stage, standing so close to Jim it was as if they were the same body. Jim could feel his breath, hear the thud of his heartbeat; the man's skin glowed and his hair was a burnished halo brushing his bare shoulders. And in these dreams, Blair touched Jim – not the familiar, friendly, joshing contact of old, but slow and deliberate, stroking Jim's face and chest; a touch at once both reverent and seductive. This ghost-Blair made Jim weak with longing, but in his dreams Jim was incapable of touching Blair in return, and his friend's smile was tinged with a deep sadness.

Such dream-visions in themselves Jim was finding unsettling enough. He thought he should be shocked - ashamed, even – but in fact he longed for more. In the last days though, his dream world had been changing. Now the ghost dog wound itself around Jim's legs, almost toppling him, and as it did so, its form became Sandburg's wolf, which then made the same sinuous path, leaving bloody paw-prints as he padded by. His own hands were bloody. He could see Blair's face covered in blood; Blair looming into his vision, leaning over him, his face ghostly pale; Blair's voice, though his lips weren't moving, calling: "Come to me!", and the fainter call, "Stay! Stay!"

Come to me come to me come to me come to me...

"Come on, Jim, liven up! You've been back weeks now. The jetlag excuse is wearing thin with Bellwood."

Jim jumped at Joel's voice and flinched again as Joel placed a battered mug of coffee on the desk. The impact sounded like a pistol shot, followed by a painful screech as the mug connected with minute eraser particles on the desk. Jim leapt back from his chair, hands over his ears.

"Goddammit, Taggart! Do you have to make such a freaking row!"

And stopped short, as the echoing in his ears dropped suddenly away and he was left in a near-silent bullpen, with Megan and Joel staring at him open-mouthed in shock.

"I take it," said Joel slowly, and with heavy emphasis, "that you may be feeling things a little too... much, right now?"

"Joel, man, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I apologise, I don't know... Well, yes, I do know. I'm not sleeping well, okay? It's giving me headaches and making me feel pretty miserable."

"Sure you aren't just coming up to your time of the month, Jim?" Megan's voice was tart.

"Connor, I don't need..."

"No, Jimbo, we don't need, okay? We don't need your histrionics. God knows this department is difficult enough to work in at the moment without you moaning and groaning. When the hell is Sandy coming back? Because we really need him to keep you in check!"

Jim stared at her, stunned by the bitterness in her voice.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I sure as hell wish he was back here, too."

Megan turned on her heel and disappeared into the corridor.

Jim looked stupefied at Joel, who came around the desk and laid a kindly hand on his shoulder.

"She's got it into her head you threw him out again."

"What! I never... It's nothing like that, Joel. I never wanted him to go." He clamped his mouth shut again, reminding himself that he and Simon had agreed to stick to the story about Sandburg and the dig, rather than prevaricate and start even more hares running.

Joel patted his back.

"We know you miss him, man. We all do. Can't wait for him to get back. The old place doesn't seem the same without the kid around." He took a sip of his coffee. "And that's not the only difference we're having to deal with."

As if on cue, the Captain's door slammed open and an irate Henri Brown stormed out, followed by his partner, who closed the door loudly behind him. Rafe looked no less put out.

"Can you believe this?" yelled Brown, causing not only Jim but Joel to wince at the volume. Rafe put his hand on his partner's arm to restrain him.

"Cool it, man! Keep your voice down!"

Brown threw him an exasperated look, and then transferred it to the door of Bellwood's office.

"Can you believe this?" He continued in an aggrieved whisper, which in truth was not too many decibels lower. "He's told us we can't follow up on the dock shootings! Even though we've had a direct request from officers in Homicide! He says we have to wait for the official papers to come through, and even then – get this! – even then he might deem it 'outside our purview.'" Henri slashed the air to make his quotation marks especially forceful. "What the hell is this all about? And what the hell is a 'purview' anyway?"

Rafe caught his arms and brought them down to his sides.

"Come on, brother, calm down. We have to watch our backs here, you know that."

Jim shot a concerned glance at Joel, and was shocked to see a sort of bitter resignation in the other man's kindly face. Joel caught his look.

"This is how it's been going, Jim, since you left. More and more we get told lay-off certain cases. Bellwood spouts crap about political sensitivity, or being outside the definition of 'major crimes' and we have to pass." He turned to Rafe. "This is what happened this time?"

Rafe nodded.

"Yep. Not a major crime, just a crime, per Bellwood. Even though it's pretty clear that these killings are part of the people-trafficking business, which is about as major a crime as you can get, by my reckoning. Plus, Homicide are tearing their hair out and asked us specifically to help. They knew we've been trying to find a way through that viper's nest for some time. Thursby and Eleanor Grace spoke with H and me, and followed it up with written crime scene details."

Jim nodded to himself.

"Roger and Eleanor are damn good cops. They must be worried if they've been lobbying for our help."

Joel turned to his friend.

"Jim, didn't you and Sandburg start an investigation recently? Something about Chinese workers?"

Jim frowned and then nodded.

"Major Crimes has poked into that area from time to time over the years. Difficult to make headway but, yeah, Sandburg and I were looking at something. It wasn't really official. Sandburg had a lead from a girl who works here. We started looking into it - in fact we talked a bit to Eleanor and Roger about possible related homicides - but then the Zeller case broke. We never had time to talk to Simon about making it an official case."

"Do Grace and Thursby think they're being blocked as well?" asked Joel.

H shrugged.

"Nothing obvious, but they're being denied manpower. Their Cap is trying to push it centrally but all he's getting is that gangsters killing gangsters is good news for the average man in the street. Why waste police time and money on following it up?"

"Bullshit!" barked Jim and Joel in unison.

"Well, we all know that," said Rafe. He picked up the thin sheaf of papers Henri had thrown on the desk, and passed it to Jim.

"Have a look, Jim." His voice was low. "We got scenes of crime stuff here, photos, locations – the usual. Worth, maybe, us taking a trip to the docks for a little sightseeing?"

Jim looked from Rafe to Brown, and then raised a quizzical eyebrow at Joel.

"Oh, don't mind about me," said Taggart good-naturedly. "I'm a little too old for traipsing round those places at the dead of night, but whatever you guys want to do in your spare time..."

Rafe looked at Jim expectantly.

"Well, big guy?"

"I'd guess any time after midnight would be good," added Brown, with a grin.

"Rendezvous with you after work," said Jim, picking up the file and his jacket. "I'm off duty right now, and going home for a few hours' sleep."

Outside the bullpen, he waited for the elevator, thinking. Good at least, surely, to be doing something, getting his teeth into a case? The waiting around was driving him crazy and only gave time for this pointless worrying about what Sandburg was doing, and the opportunity for those terrifying and disturbing images to surface and ambush him. Yes, he needed distraction, but that wasn't the whole story. Though he honoured discipline – the Army had instilled that in him – he refused to accept his job now meant blind obedience and a deliberate avoidance of difficult cases. If they got in trouble taking the initiative, then too bad.

The elevator pinged and the door opened. He was just about to step inside when he heard his name being called in an urgent whisper.

"Jim! Jim! Detective Er'son!"

He turned to see the pretty little Chinese girl who had locked onto Sandburg weeks ago beckoning him from down the corridor. She was surrounded by her cleaning equipment, standing by the door to the stairwell. She looked round anxiously as she gave her discreet waves, as if frightened of being spotted.



And suddenly it hit him. This was the pretty little Chinese girl who told Blair about a missing brother, and who had started them on that interrupted foray into the world of gangmasters and illegals. He remembered Blair's incandescent rage as he heard the story, the injustice of it all burning in his eyes like blue fire. No-one with Blair's sense of humanity and fellow-feeling could have refused help, and, cynical cop as he was, Jim had been equally glad to take a professional interest.

Except they had got nowhere, of course. As he approached the girl – Xui Li, yes, that was her name – he automatically started composing the excuses in his head, a way to let her down gently.

But as he reached her, she grabbed his arm, and with a swift look round to check whether they were being observed, dragged him with surprising force through the door into the quiet stairwell.

"Xui Li, what...?"

He had no chance to finish.

"You see San'bur? He got news for us, yes?"

He patted her arm.

"Xui Li, I'm sorry. Blair isn't here right now. I've not seen him for a good while. We didn't have a chance to get far with your brother's case, I'm sorry. We ran out of time. Now Blair is... um... out of the country."

Xui Li gave him a puzzled look.

"Gone away? San'bur? But he say he was helping us again! He can't have gone away, Jim, please? He a good man! He promised! This time he would not let us down!"

Jim grasped her wrist as her words hit him.

"What do you mean, 'this time'? Blair and I had to stop investigating almost three months ago, before I got shot."

Xui Li wriggled a little in Jim's grip and he released her arm, realising too late how hard he had been gripping her. She was rubbing her wrist.

"Oh, Xui Li, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"Is okay, Jim. You worried too, yes? San'bur came to see my father and me, twice. The last time he say he going to work in secret. I was to say nothing. But he tell you, yes? And I am so worried now. First my brother and Feng leave, now San'bur also go away. He has not spoken to you? You don't know where he go?"

She gazed at Jim with wide, dark eyes full of concern. Jim was staring off into space, calculating.

Calculating the weeks that had elapsed since he went to Spain; calculating the kind of commitment that would have caused Blair to write that note and effectively disappear, leaving false trails; calculating the probability that the reason for his disappearance was closely connected to their current precarious position in the eyes of the PD.

It's IMPORTANT I do this, for both of us.

He looked down at Xui Li again.

"No, Xui Li, I don't know. But I'm going to find out."

## Chapter 10

When, at 1 am, Jim coasted the truck up to the outlying warehouses, Rafe and Brown were already there. There was no need to disguise their presence. That sector was a hive of activity with forklifts and low-loaders dealing with cargo from local freighters. The two civilian cars fitted in with the others parked nearby. They had agreed no radios, so no one in Dispatch could latch onto what they were doing, so he slid out of the driver's seat and crossed to Rafe's car. Rafe wound down the driver's window.

"H and me did a trawl of the quayside a little while ago," he reported to Jim. "You can look over the water to the warehouses. Looked like a few lights and activity over in Block C, the older buildings. They tend not to see so much business nowadays – they're waiting for redevelopment, according to Grace and Thursby. That's where they spotted activity over different nights when they've been watching, but without the backup to do much, of course."

"Where was the killing spree of last week in relation to there?" asked Jim, looking around.

Henri gestured to his left.

"Block B, but to my mind, looking at the Scenes of Crime pictures, those guys were lured to the spot, and then ambushed. There's not a whole lot there to allow much business to be done undercover. It's mostly cold storage and chillers. Hardly room to swing a cat."

Jim contemplated for a moment, scanning the warehouse complex stretching out along this quieter part of the bay. Further away from Block A, where they were at present, he could see the area getting lonelier and lonelier, with only token security lighting and the occasional pass of a security firm's van. He threw out his vision to the dimmer area that was Block C.

There, the official lighting was haphazard and limited, as though no one was too bothered to spend money on a rundown complex. It looked quiet as the grave, but searching further with his senses he pinpointed the blink of flashlights, some truck headlights moving, and a couple of dimly-lit windows. Concentrating even more, he could make out the shadowy figures of a couple of guards on the top of the first building in the group.

Jim turned again and bent down to speak into Rafe's window.

"Guys, can I ask you to go along with me here? I'm pretty sure that whoever is active in that area has got goons on the lookout. Armed, at that..."

Rafe and Brown exchanged a look.

"I suggest we drive round in a sizeable arc," continued Jim, "then go in from the rear on foot. With no backup to rely on and no real idea of the strength of their setup, we should aim tonight to get a feel for the scale of the operation - what's going down."

Brown spoke for the two of them.

"Sounds like a plan to me, my man. Rafe and I knew you'd be good at this, on account of..." he coughed, "... the Army stuff. You wanna be point?"

Jim smiled grimly.

"My pleasure, gentlemen."

\*

Blair swung the light van, a nondescript white with no markings, in through the open warehouse door and drew up next to a mid-sized semi-truck, already parked. A couple of Dmitriy Lutsevich's men were there, lounging against the sides and smoking.

This was familiar territory for him now. He had spent the past three weeks running more and more errands for Lutsevich, who had seemed impressed with his energy and resourcefulness in dealing with the increasing shipments of migrant labour. He was consequently working less and less with Irene, but that mattered little; Lutsevich was his target now.

He jumped out of the cab and gave the other men a sketchy wave. The skinny one with the bright gold earring pushed himself off the truck side.

"Well, if it isn't Irene's toyboy..."

Blair smiled.

"You know, Stefan," he said pleasantly, "if that was true, it means at least one of us is getting laid."

Stefan frowned, but the other man, stocky and thickset with a very bald pate, gave a snort of laughter and slapped the disgruntled skinny man on the back.

"You're early, toyboy."

"That a crime?"

Baldy grinned, slightly toothlessly.

"Mr Lutsevich wants to see you. Office." He pointed up the flight of metal stairs where lighted windows indicated activity.

"Okay," said Blair, making his way to the stairs and sidestepping a glaring Stefan. "Isn't the load in yet?"

"We have load later," replied Baldy, back at his smoking post. "They changed route tonight. Just being careful."

Blair nodded and bounded up the metal steps, pausing at the top to rap on the door.

The occupant of the office was in his mid-40s, well-built with dark close-cropped hair and a neat beard. He wore the requisite Russian gangster outfit of black jeans and leather jacket, but somehow skewed the effect by combining those with a colourful golfing jumper – lime-green with pink triangles down the front; a strange and eccentric gesture from someone whom Blair, with several weeks of observation under his belt, now knew to be black of heart and devoid of soul. Dealing with the guy was like trying to read expressions in a snake – impossible, they didn't exist.

"He wanted me, Dmitriy?" he began breezily.

Lutsevich gestured him to a chair and Blair sat, trying to look at ease, and not let his edginess show. He gave a quick glance at the rest of the office. All was as normal; the one filing cabinet – he suspected little used; the desk; the table with the scotch bottles; and the bank of three CCTV cameras, each showing a different view of the warehouse complex. One was pointing at the warehouse below, looking out over the vehicles and toward the open door. Another camera showed an empty space, and the third, a further loading bay and a large trailer. Another three of Lutsevich's men stood around it.

Blair looked quickly back at Lutsevich, who was watching him with what appeared to be mild amusement. Like a cat, thought Blair, watching an unwary mouse.

"Dorfo said the shipment wasn't in," he said, pointing to the third screen.

Lutsevich smiled.

"The Tacoma truck isn't. This is a different run. We don't list this with the rest of them. It'll go out tonight, though."

Blair's brain was working furiously to process this new bit of the jigsaw. Going out to where? Was this how the missing men disappear? But he only nodded politely.

"About that, Dmitriy. You know Irene's got this really cool new scheduling system? We've worked out how we can divide up the groups and work more transports between here and the drop-offs. It helps if I can start the processing here, though..."

Lutsevich raised a hand, palm outward, to stop him in mid-flow.

"I know all about Irene's new plan, Brad. Except that it isn't Irene's, is it?"

Blair did his best to look bemused.

"Because Irene, for all her wicked ways," continued Lutsevich, "isn't sharp enough to work this out on her own, is she?"

The man was smiling pleasantly at him. Blair hoped desperately this wasn't a bad sign.

"No, Dmitriy. I mean yes, well, quite a lot I worked out, but Irene..."

Lutsevich laughed.

"Brad, Brad, if you're going to get on in this job – and I have to say I think you have a natural aptitude for it – then you must learn to take the credit, especially if it's your own credit! The system works well, I'm pleased, and you shall certainly continue to process the shipments here. You think I want to trust that to Dorfo and Stefan? No, no, you're doing well."

Lutsevich slapped Blair on the shoulder and moved over to the table.

"I don't usually take chances on people, you know. We've known each other only a short while but I think to myself, you are different from the other men who work for me. You think different - clever. I like that, I need that sort of brain."

He poured scotch into two tumblers.

"And also, you don't think like the snakes I usually employ," he continued, as if musing. "You are an innocent, yes? Your life has been so unlike where you are right now. You have a strange morality. It makes you less corruptible, I think."

He smiled, as if amused by the thought, but the smile did not reach his eyes

"Of course, if you were corruptible... well, that would be another matter."

Then, suddenly business-like again, he presented one of the tumblers to Blair.

"Stay, have some real Scotch whisky with me, then you can get started on the truck in number three."

Blair had been growing ever more tense as Lutsevich had delivered his character assessment, waiting for the unspoken 'but', and for the sudden, but predictable, change to hostility. He was taken aback by the unexpected offer.

"Scotch?"

Lutsevich smiled again.

"Vodka is every-day. Vodka's for the troops."

Blair relaxed back into the chair with a minute sigh of relief. But as he took hold of the whisky tumbler, Lutsevich's fingers clamped around his hand.

"There's just one thing, Brad Somerby. You call me Dmitriy one more time, and Dorfo will put you in the dock where you won't be found. Understood?"

Blair swallowed heavily.

"Understood. Mr Lutsevich."

\*

The progress around Block B of the warehouses had been fairly easy. Only once had they needed to pull over, while a blank-sided white minivan swung round the complex and disappeared into the darkness around Block C. Rafe pulled out of the shadows again and continued his stealthy way, without lights.

"Good thing you heard that truck, Jim," said Henri. "Whoever it was, they've obviously got business in Block C." He trailed off. "You okay, man? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Jim gave him a distracted look.

"What? Sorry, H."

"You seen something else, Jim?"

"No, no, I don't think so. It's okay..."

Far from okay, thought Henri, privately, looking at his colleague's drawn face in the dim light. In fact, Jim would have agreed with him. Something had disoriented him as the white van sped by, a sudden burst in his senses which made his ears ring with the sound of the tyres on the asphalt and he squinted against the flash of bright headlights long after the vehicle had passed. Something about the van had jangled his brain for long moments, and had stirred something deep which he couldn't quite name, like the tail-end of a dream just after waking – impossible to recapture.

He shook himself.

"Rafe, next building," he instructed. "Then we'll go on foot."

A few minutes later, the three of them were walking quietly, Indian file, around the edge of the outer warehouse. Jim, leading, peered cautiously in through the narrow opening at a loading-bay door and saw the white van, another small truck and two goons. That made a least four, counting the men on the roof, but he suspected more. His eye was caught by the lighted office windows. He could make out two shadowy figures, and automatically threw out his sight and hearing further.

The sudden discovery made his knees crumple, and only Henri's quickthinking prevented cop, and gun, from falling to the floor with an unwelcome clatter. Henri cautiously drew Jim away from the danger of detection and back into the deep shadows.

"What the fuck, man? You okay?"

Jim looked wildly at H and his partner.

"Sandburg is there!"

To their credit, neither of his colleagues uttered a word, but he could see suspicion and disbelief in their shadowed faces.

"I could hear him," Jim insisted. "Hear him talking. He's in the upper office with someone else. I could see another guy walking around, but they're too close together to make out much detail."

Jim didn't add that he is also caught a glimpse of his friend's distinctive profile, but there was something not quite right about the silhouette, though it was difficult to differentiate between the two figures.

"What you mean, 'hear'?" whispered Rafe. "You mean 'hear' as in 'hear'? Or 'hear', you know, as in...?"

H gave him a look to shut him up, and then turned back to Jim.

"You serious, Jim? If so, this is gonna be tricky. But Sandburg in this kind of operation? It doesn't make sense."

Jim passed a worried hand over his own forehead.

"It would make sense if this is where he got to. He's taken himself off on some damn-fool mission on his own – that's all I know – something to do with him getting kicked out of the PD and all the other crap going on. But I had no idea it could be here. Not until I saw that white van. I sensed something then. I felt..."

He broke off. Henri and Rafe were both giving him a wild-eyed look.

"Let's circle here," he finished briskly. "We'll look at the next two buildings and then get back to base. I think I need to talk to Simon."

If either of his two colleagues were surprised he didn't mention Bellwood, they certainly didn't protest about it.

\*

Quiet, cautiously-placed footsteps; swift, shadowy movement – Rafe and Henri found it difficult to match Jim's pace or stealth. It was as if some wild animal was patrolling its territory, thought Henri vaguely, as he tried to keep step. Now you see him, now you don't.

Then they were at the main door of the next building, a large '3' painted on its side. The shutters were down but there was a smaller door propped open and light streamed out. Via the door frame, the three cops could see another covered trailer, and three men slumped against some packing cases, playing cards. Something was disturbing Jim once again, H noticed. He was holding one hand to an ear, as if to focus on sound.

"What is it, man?"

"People. People in there."

"Yeah, three guys," said Rafe absently, checking his gun.

"No, a lot more," said Jim. And H went wide-eyed again as a sudden murmur of voices started up from within the truck. One of the guys on the ground got up, irritation written all over his face, and slammed his hand on the truck's side, shouting something in what sounded like Russian. The murmuring stopped, and then a strong voice with heavily-accented English spoke alone from within the truck.

"Water? Please, give us some water. For the love of God."

The gunman cursed again, grabbed one of the water-cooler bottles stacked in the far side of the warehouse and then, his colleagues around him with their guns raised, pulled back the tarpaulin at the rear of the truck. The warehouse lights showed enough. The back of the truck was packed with about 15 men, all looking tired, dirty and ill-fed. They stared back at the guns pointed in their direction with hollow eyes. The lead gunman pushed the water bottle into the arms of the tall man at the front of the crowd, and with a few words the tarp was pulled back again.

Rafe called it, for all of them, with his quiet mutter.

"Illegals, and going to be moved. Soon."

Jim shook his head angrily.

"Can't let that happen."



Henri grabbed his arm.

“Not tonight, man. We can’t do anything. We’ve no backup, no authority, and if we spook this setup, we lose our one lead.”

Jim cursed under his breath. Henri was right of course. But he wanted nothing more than to run in with guns blazing, tear this foul operation down around its own ears and grab his missing Sandburg.

“Okay,” he agreed, his mind still in turmoil. But as he lifted his head he caught sight of something he should have seen from the start; the red winking light of a CCTV camera.

\*



It was quite possible that both Blair and Lutsevich caught sight of the three figures looking in at the door of no. 3 at the same time. Their reactions were very different though. Blair almost choked on his scotch as he instantly recognised his friends; Lutsevich grabbed a radio and started yelling into it.

“Dorfo, what the fuck are you doing? Sitting on your fat arse as usual? We have three snoopers at no. 3! Get them!”

Blair saw from the other screen that both Dorfo and Stefan leapt into action, grabbing their guns. Next, Lutsevich was yelling into the radio again, this time to his men in no. 3. Blair saw Jim looking up, clearly catching sight of the camera.

Too late, man! What's wrong with you? Didn't you check for this first?

He flipped his gaze from screen to screen, his mouth opening and closing like a carp's, as he spent nanoseconds in agonised indecision. Finally, as Lutsevich was running to the door with his own gun in hand, Blair blurted it out.

"They're cops! Well, that one is, the tall one, so yeah, the other two as well, I guess! Mr Lutsevich, let's get the hell out, yeah, leave the shipments? We can out-run just three guys!"

Lutsevich swung back towards him with surprise and interest in his face.

"You know this? You know they are cops? How is this?" His gun was now trained on Blair, who pointed frantically at the TV monitor.

"That one, the big one. I owe him money. He plays cards at the place I go to. I'm into him for some serious bread. That's how I recognise him! I don't know the others, I'm just guessing!"

Lutsevich gave him a sceptical look and lowered his gun. Out of the corner of his eye, Blair saw Jim, Henri and Rafe now hemmed in on each side by Lutsevich's five employees, and the two from the roof had also arrived to join in the fun.

"So, like..." he continued desperately, grasping for words to string Lutsevich along. "... so, you don't want to be messing with cops, Mr Lutsevich! There's nothing to pin you to this. Get out now! The boys can just cut and run. The cops can't overpower them!"

Lutsevich gave him another curious look.

"Of course we need to deal with this. We can shift our operations, but these men, they've seen us. And we know they're cops, thanks to you. So we also need to get rid of them."

"No!" shouted Blair, in horror. Lutsevich looked at him, askance.

"No, Mr Lutsevich!" he continued, trying hard to control his voice. "No killing, please! Is it really necessary? They won't know where we've shifted to! And you'll have murder on your hands!"

Lutsevich was gazing at him, eyebrow raised.

"I sometimes find it hard to believe you're really this naive, you know. You think this is an unusual situation for me? Poor Mr University Professor, such an awakening! My boy, you'll have to grow up if you want to continue working for me. You come with me now. It's about time you got some important education."

Lutsevich held the door open and gestured for Blair to lead the way. Blair, almost beside himself with fear for Jim and the others, fumbled his way down the metal stairs. His stomach roiled with the terror and hopelessness of it all. What to do? What could he possibly do?

He swallowed hard and then blew out his cheeks.

"Oh man, I'm gonna hurl! Give me a minute."

Lutsevich looked him with distaste.

"Be quick. Then join us in no. 3."

Blair slumped back against the steps as Lutsevich disappeared from view, then he was up and running for the cab of the white van, grabbing his bag and dragging his replacement cellphone from inside. He punched in a well-remembered number, and with relief he heard the connection open.

"Cascade Dispatch."

"I need backup! Docks, southern wharf! Right now!"

"Identify yourself, officer."

"Detective Jim Ellison. I'm calling for Detective Jim Ellison. He needs back-up now! Right now! Three officers in serious danger! They're outnumbered, there's gonna be an execution! I need, I need... three cars, at least! There are eight heavily-armed men about to take them out..."

"Sorry, officer, I don't have track of that shift."

"Does it matter? Does it matter? They're going to be killed! Get back-up here now!"

"Officer, can you identify..."

Blair jammed his thumb on the 'end' button and stared at the phone in horror and disbelief. They were denying back-up. The PD was denying back-up to its own people...

Fighting the panic, he wracked his brain, desperately combing his memory for helpful names – immigrants, disappearances, murder...

He punched the numbers again.

"Cascade Dispatch."

"Patch me through to Detective Eleanor Grace, Homicide." He kept his voice as level as he could.

In seconds, Eleanor's cool, world-weary tones answered.

"Eleanor, it's Blair Sandburg!"

"Blair?"

By this time, Blair was reduced to one word statements.

"Eleanor! Help! Jim! Docks! Help! Trouble..."

"Oh, shit," said Eleanor Grace. "Hang on, honey. We're on our way."

## Chapter 11

8 am, and the long and trying night was turning into what promised to be a long and trying day. Of course, Jim reflected, he and the other two were pretty lucky to have seen a new day dawn at all. Not counting his monumental error in not checking for CCTV before they had moved into the light – he hadn't even begun to analyse that disaster, though it all seemed wrapped up in his current maelstrom of senses and confusion, made worse by the sudden sighting of Blair - they had been outgunned, outmanoeuvred, and in a classic stand-off; maybe they could've used their guns, but it would have been eight against three – unlikely odds.

They were pretty much waiting for the bullets when the white van had screamed round the corner with its side doors wide open. The occupant was a blur in the darkness, but Jim could see through the glare of the headlights, picking out the profile he had spotted in the upstairs office, and he had heard what had unmistakably been Blair's voice shouting a warning. He could already pick up the wail of sirens down the dock. With no more than a second's hesitation, the bearded boss man had leapt for the vehicle with two of his goons, and the van had sped off. In the confusion that followed, Jim, Rafe and Brown had managed to disarm two of the others and disable the remainder with shots to the leg or shoulder. It was no real surprise, minutes later, to discover that the van had run straight into the Homicide cars as they sped towards the warehouses. Mr Beard had been seized and held, but it appeared that the driver had somehow slipped away, according to Grace and Thursby who had greeted Jim with smiles of relief and subtle winks.

It had been all over in a matter of minutes, but the adrenaline rush for all the detectives, the brush with death and the surprisingly successful collar that transpired, left them strung out and hyper. This exhilaration, in his colleagues' case, was translating into a particularly vocal and energetic interrogation session for Mr Beard – now known as DmitriyLutsevich. For Jim, it materialised into a thumping headache and extreme sensitivity to the sounds of the PD, no matter how hard he tried to dial it all down, and as the long morning wore on, his propensity to bite the heads off his fellow officers any time anyone opened their mouths increased exponentially, until he thought he was ready to explode.

He had managed to obtain everyone's consent that Blair's presence would not be mentioned. As if he hadn't already suspected it, he found out quickly from Eleanor that it had been Blair's inspired phone call that had brought them the backup they had needed,

and in the nick of time. As it happened, Eleanor and Thursby, with a couple of colleagues, had been cruising the docks area in their own off-the-record sweep. Rafe had told them privately that the Major Crimes trio were going to take a look that night, and so the Homicide team had decided to stick around in case they were needed – a lucky call if ever there was one.

Jim had also learned from his quick, private chat with Eleanor that before Blair had hung up, he had gabbled something about Dispatch refusing back-up. Intrigued, Jim had paid an early morning visit to Dispatch while Rafe and Brown began their sweating of the Lutsevich guy. The night shift had not yet signed off, so in theory it should have been easy to pin down what had happened. In practice, he had met a stone wall of sizeable portions. There had been no call for back-up from the docks. And if there had been one, any back-up would have been sent. Except there had been low staffing that evening and all back-up had been thin on the ground. And anyway, no-one had heard Detective Ellison's name mentioned over the air...

Seething, he had slammed back upstairs to Major Crimes, to be greeted by Bellwood's sour face and a summons to his office, where he now stood, facing the full blast of the Captain's fury.

"I don't need yet another Ellison disaster, Detective! You mounted an unsanctioned police operation, endangering the lives of your colleagues and decent ordinary citizens. You show no respect to orders given by this office. You are grossly insubordinate, Detective!"

Jim wryly noted how he had mysteriously turned into the leader of the little joint operation – not that he would've ducked the role any case – but the classification of Lutsevich and his cohorts as 'decent ordinary citizens' was a step too far. He strove to keep his voice even as he fought his internal anger.

"Captain, we've uncovered a significant player in the people-smuggling racket in Cascade. These guys are potential key perps in the docks shootings. And while it might have been preferable to play them until we got to the top, the circumstances..."

"Preferable?" screeched Bellwood, his face growing redder. "How preferable is it to have made arrests without a shred of evidence? This is a classic example of the slipshod way you operate, Ellison, with no regard for procedure or criminal law..."

"Now just a goddamn minute...!"

"No evidence, Detective! There is no evidence! It's your word against Mr Lutsevich's that the men apprehended were foreign workers, involved in some way with Mr Lutsevich's operations..."

"In a pig's ear! It's perfectly clear what was going on!"

"No, Detective, it's perfectly clear that you're prepared to fabricate stories to pursue your own agenda. You are a hair's breadth, Ellison..." – Bellwood measured the distance with his thumb and forefinger – "... a hair's breadth from suspension for your incompetent and arrogant behaviour!"

Jim shook his head angrily.

"Two good detectives were with me tonight, following up on clear leads from PD colleagues. We had probable cause, and the way things panned out demonstrates how right we were. Christ, we were a hair's breadth from being executed tonight!"

Bellwood glared at him.

"And whose fault would that have been, Detective?"

That got Jim in the gut. He was still rattled by his failure to detect the surveillance at the warehouse. It was true, Rafe and Brown had been relying on him, and he'd failed them. But nevertheless...He rallied.

"If you'd listened to Brown in the first place, you could have sanctioned our op, we would have had sufficient resources..."

"Don't hide behind that one, Detective!" Bellwood jabbed bony finger at Jim's chest. "You screwed up. Don't start whining about failed back-up calls!"

In the midst of his anger, Jim did a double-take. He hadn't even mentioned the back-up fiasco to Bellwood. But he wasn't going to raise that slip right now.

"In any case," he continued, "we have sufficient paper evidence from Lutsevich's office."

Bellwood suddenly looked at his watch.

"I've got no time for this, Ellison. Major Crimes is due a PR visit from Commissioner Wade this morning."

"That creep?" exploded Jim. "Well, he and I are having words!"

"You will do no such thing, Detective," said Bellwood menacingly. "You keep well clear. There are press and cameras coming with him. You want to give the Commissioner yet more proof of your sorry state of work performance and mental attitude?"

His voice became even more hostile.

"I warn you Detective, you really do not want to screw up even further right now."

There was a knock at the door, and Rhonda entered, without permission, as had become her wont since Bellwood had taken to tearing strips off colleagues for what she considered no good reason.

"Captain, the Commissioner's downstairs, making his way through the building. And Brown wants a word."

And without waiting for Bellwood's say-so, she ushered Henri in and departed, deliberately leaving the door ajar.

"Brown, what you want?" snapped Bellwood in exasperation.

Henri threw Jim a worried glance.

"Two things, Captain. One is, the evidence we brought with us from the bust this morning. We took it for processing but Rafe just went to check and they've got no record..."

"What?" yelled Jim. "What the hell is going on here?"

He swung round to Bellwood who looked deadpan at him.

"No use tap-dancing, Ellison. You never had the evidence, and you know it!"

Jim opened his mouth to utter what would probably have been a resignation statement, heavy on the four-letter words, when Brown grabbed his arm.

"There's worse, Jim. Andrew Dammer's here, springing Lutsevich and the others."

"Dammer?" Jim's shout of fury almost prompted Henri to take a step backwards. "Dammer? How the hell can he afford Dammer?"

He brushed past Bellwood and hurried into the bullpen and thence into the corridor, Henri at his heels. He was just in time to see a disgruntled-looking Rafe handing Lutsevich over to a slickly-dressed lawyer accompanied by a couple of bag-carriers. Andrew Dammer was a byword in the PD for legal expediency. He took any case that paid well and had long been reviled for his legal defence of well-known white-collar criminals. He was not a man to care, though, and happily laughed all his way to the bank with the enormous fees he raked in.

The lawyer was beaming, Lutsevich was smirking. Further away, down the corridor, a tight phalanx of people, with Wade at its centre and photographers on each side, was steadily making its way towards Major Crimes. Jim blocked the sounds of the oncoming pageant and associated flashes as best he could, and shouldered his way past Lutsevich and the minders to confront Dammer.

Dammer saw his approach and turned to face him with a blisteringly artificial smile of welcome.

"Well, well, Detective Ellison. So glad you could join us. Might I suggest an apology is due to my client, Mr Lutsevich? Not that it will do anything to stop our suit for unlawful arrest, of course."

Behind him, Jim heard Lutsevich's snort of laughter.

"I don't apologise to this lowlife for anything, Dammer. You're the one who should be apologising to Cascade for protecting dirty money yet again."

Dammer frowned.

"Really, Detective Ellison? Such accusations. I shall have to consult my legal colleagues with a view to determining whether I've been slandered. In the meantime, my client and I were just leaving."

"You're going nowhere," growled Jim, vaguely aware on one side of something that sounded like a brass band approaching, while on the other side, Henri plucked desperately at his sleeve. "Your client is dirty as hell, and you know it..."

Dammer smiled broadly again.

"But where's your evidence, Detective? On the contrary, Mr Lutsevich was conducting a perfectly legal export business from one warehouse at the location when you unlawfully arrested him. What went on in the other warehouses was no concern of his."

"Bullshit!" snapped Jim. "Your client will be back here before he knows it. I'm going to..."

Suddenly the corridor was filled with voices and flashguns. Jim put his hands to his ears, and staggered slightly. He was aware of faces looming at him, regarding him oddly, Henri gamely trying to pull him away from the crowd.

But Dammer just wouldn't stop.

"Are you quite well, Detective?" The tone was acid. "Perhaps you're missing your little helper – what was his name again? Sand Boy? I guess it's not unexpected he's run – a flake as well as a failure and a fraud..."

Dammer turned his head to take the applause of his coterie, and a split second later, Jim's fist slammed out and connected with his face. All at once, Dammer was on the ground, clutching his nose, Jim was standing over him flexing his fists and breathing heavily, and the world was filled with a barrage of camera flashes.

The rage dissipated as quickly as it had arisen, quenched by the ice-cold realisation of what had just happened, recorded by Cascade's press, and disrupting the PR campaign of its esteemed Commissioner of Police. Jim raised his head, stony-faced, to look straight into the hostile eyes of Wade, flanked by the smirking countenance of Lance Prentiss.

The reporters whooped and scurried away, leaving Wade almost abandoned. Dammer was shouting – albeit slightly muffled by a bloody handkerchief, Lutsevich was laughing heartily. Jim felt himself being bodily dragged away from the scene by Rafe and Henri.



\*

Interview Room 3 was a haven of quiet and calm after the corridor. Henri and Rafe threw Jim into it with about the same force they would have used for dealing with a drive-by shooter and closed the door quickly, Rafe stationed as look-out at the window. Jim sat down heavily at the small table and put his head in his hands.

"What the fuck, Jim?" started Henri, still wide-eyed with shock. "What the fuck was all that? Do you know what you've done?"

"H, this whole thing is dirty..."

"Yeah, of course it is. Any fool can see that. Did you have to blow a gasket like that? Jesus, it's not just your job on the line, it's all of us!"

Jim looked up, and gave him a stricken look.

"H, I'm so sorry."

Henri felt himself relent. Dammit, the guy was his friend, and in a hell of a mess. He stepped over to the table and laid a gentle hand on Jim's shoulder.

"It's okay, man. Take it easy. Let's see what we can salvage."

Rafe suddenly opened the door and Joel slid into the room, his face a picture of concern. In answer to Henri's unasked question, he grimaced.

"All hell's broken loose. Wade's been in with Bellwood. He's just left, looking like a thunderstorm. I guess our Captain may well be on his way, Jim."

Jim stared back at Joel hopelessly.

"Joel, I can't... It's all going wrong." He rubbed his hand across his brow. "It hasn't been like this since... since..."

"Before Sandburg," said Joel quietly. Three pairs of eyes turned to look at him; two with puzzlement, one with despair and a hopeless realisation.

"Before... what?" pressed Rafe, never one to forego the obvious question. Joel didn't answer, but just looked steadily at Jim.

"Before Sandburg arrived," answered Jim, almost in a whisper. "Before I met him, before he... sorted me out." But his gaze told Joel much more, admitting something Jim Ellison couldn't say out loud.

I've lost him, and I'm falling apart.

Joel merely gave him a curt nod. Rafe was still looking puzzled.

"Is this, you know, like the whole..." His voice dropped to whisper. "...the whole Sentinel thing?"

Henri huffed in exasperation.

"Man, wake up and smell the Outer Limits coffee. Now quit yapping and let's think up a good excuse for Bellwood."

Jim suddenly turned to Henri.

"H, what happened to the guys from the trailer, the illegals? Their statements could still tie Lutsevich in with all this, but that would also make them targets for Lutsevich's people..."

Rafe cleared his throat nervously.

"That's another thing, Jim. Sorry. I never had a chance to tell you. I found out just before Dammer came for Lutsevich. The illegals have disappeared. They were checked into the holding cells and then checked out to people from Immigration two hours later. No-one got in touch with us for clearance, no-one recognised the guys who came to pick them up, so..."

He tailed off, looking unhappy. Brown looked thunderstruck at Jim, whose face was starting to resolve back into the wild man of the corridor.

"The bastards..." began Jim. "Oh, this can't wait..."

"Hang on," said Joel swiftly, holding up his hand. "Calm down, everyone. I cannot tell a lie. That was me."

Now three faces looked at him with open mouths.

"What?" said all three simultaneously.

"Well," said Joel, studying his nails, "I found out quite quickly that your evidence had been trashed. Something I heard downstairs. I put two and two together and guessed someone might be preparing to remove the Russian illegals from the picture too, so I rang a couple of friends in Immigration. As it happened, they had a transport going back empty to a shelter in Tacoma this morning. Their guys picked up your guys, and the paperwork for where they went is right now getting nicely snarled up in Immigration's Admin Department. There's been no time to tell you. I've only just got back from sorting it out."

Jim's face broke out into a huge grin.

"Captain Taggart, I could kiss you!"

Joel look abashed.

"Time and place, Detective,"

"Too late anyway," snapped Rafe, and the door burst open to admit Bellwood, whose face was now dark with anger, though his voice stayed level.

"I don't see what you have to smile about, Ellison."

Jim went straightfaced and stood to attention.

"Captain."

Bellwood looked around the little group in the Interrogation Room.

"And I don't know what the hell you all are doing here instead of being out there dealing with the mess you've created!"

He looked pointedly to the door. There was a slight pause and the four men made to leave.

"Not you, Ellison," snapped Bellwood, pointing at Jim.

The other three gave Jim a wary look and slid out of the door. Bellwood closed it firmly behind them.

"You realise what you did out there, Ellison?" continued Bellwood, pointing at the wall to indicate the corridor outside. "You are aware that you have been brawling in the PD, in full view of members of the Press who have obtained plenty of photographic evidence of your behaviour? You are aware you have committed an unprovoked assault on a member of the legal community?"

"Unprovoked? And he's no reputable attorney!"

"Enough! You dare to interrupt me now, Ellison?" Bellwood was all quiet fury. "Moreover, the whole farrago happened in front of the Commissioner of Police. And if that weren't enough, you've managed to lose fifteen Russian illegal immigrants. I want to know where they are."

Jim gave Bellwood his best quizzical look.

"Why are you concerned about them, captain? You told me they had nothing to do with Lutsevich?"

Bellwood visibly hesitated, but only for a fraction of a second.

"Don't you smart-mouth me, Mister. They are part of this shambles and it needs to be resolved. Tell me where they are."

Jim gave him an innocent look.

"Well, gee, Captain, don't ask me. We just brought them in. Why don't you ask our nice colleagues down in Receiving who lost our evidence this morning?"

"That's enough backchat, Ellison. I am sick and tired of your insubordination. Once again, you reduce Major Crimes to being a laughing stock and the subject of ridicule. It'll be all over the Press later today. How do you think the Commissioner feels about that?"

"My heart bleeds for him."

Bellwood straightened up.

"Any one of the things you've done in the last 24 hours would warrant your suspension. Altogether the case is irrefutable. Detective Ellison, you are suspended from duty, without pay, as of this moment."

Bellwood held out his hand.

"Your gun and badge, please."

Jim looked at him coldly, then took off his shoulder-holster, pulled his badge from his belt and placed them both gently on the table.

"Thank you, said Bellwood formally. "Now, you will quit this Department and you will not return until your case has been resolved by the disciplinary process. Go home, Ellison, get the hell out of my life."

Jim paused for a moment, as the enormity of what actually just happened sank in. No longer a cop; no longer part of the Cascade family, with its support and its resources; no longer a paid employee. He was now divorced from the only thing that had defined his life for almost ten years, cast adrift from its stabilising influence.

Except... except... so what? He was still Jim Ellison. And somewhere out there was Blair Sandburg, who in reality was all Jim Ellison needed. He knew that now. All he had to do was find him again.

He smiled coldly at Bellwood.

"Captain, I want to emphasise that Rafe and Brown took my instructions in this matter. They're great detectives and they don't deserve any disciplinary action for what happened."

Bellwood waved his hand impatiently.

"I don't have a quarrel with them, Ellison."

Jim nodded.

"See you around, then, Captain."

In three strides he was out of the door.

"Not if I can help it," muttered Bellwood under his breath. He stood for a moment, brow knitted in thought. There was a rap at the door and he turned to snap at the intruder, only see Megan Connor smiling sweetly at him, and looking concerned.

"Are you all right, Captain?"

Bellwood shrugged and nodded. Megan looked back at the corridor behind her.

"Well, that's Ellison out of the way. God, but that man is complete arsehole... pardon my French, Captain. He's always been a surly git, but he's been unbearable these past weeks. We'll all be glad he's gone."

She fell into step with Bellwood as he left the room.

"Can I get you anything, Captain? Cup of coffee, maybe? And, to be honest, I'm a bit light of work at the moment, so if there's anything I can help you with, let me know. I mean, I heard Commissioner Wade ask you about that load of Russian illegals that's gone missing somehow. Want me to look into that for you?"

Bellwood regarded her closely, but saw no evidence of a wind-up.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. And yes, a coffee would be good right now."

\*

"You pleased with yourself, Connor?"

Megan turned from the coffee machine to find herself being studied by hostile-looking Detectives Brown and Rafe.

"What's your problem, mates?" she asked, guardedly.

"Isn't it obvious, Megan?" replied Rafe. "You cosyng up to Bellwood. Getting some brownie points there, are you? Don't feel the need to show some support for your teammates, mate?"

Megan placed her coffees carefully on the nearby table and walked up to them both so that she was nose to nose with them. Hands on hips, she snarled:

"And what if I think someone needs to be doing a normal day's work in Major Crimes? Keeping the show on the road instead of having a temper tantrum every time something goes wrong?"

"You do realise what happened, Connor?" asked Brown, incredulously. "You do realise that we were banned from carrying out work, damn near got killed for doing it anyway, and then found our own colleagues were in on the deal?" Henri gave his words heavy emphasis. "And on top of that, Jim loses his job."

"Oh, do me a favour!" Megan spun round again and grabbed the coffees. "It's not all about the great Jim Ellison, you know. Some of us have a different way of making sense of things."

Megan looked significantly at them both as she uttered those last words, but Rafe and Brown were barely listening. It was Joel at another table who spoke up.

"And what sense do you see, Megan?" he asked softly. She turned to him.

"I see things that need sorting out, and the only way to do that is to work at them. So that's what I'm doing."

With that, she walked briskly out of the break room, Joel watching her thoughtfully as she left. Henri and Rafe however remained unsatisfied.

"She's off to Bellwood again."

"Yeah, telling tales."

"I expected more of her..."

Joel stood up sharply.

"Oh, can it, you two! Isn't it bad enough already without having us at each other's throats?"

They stared rebelliously at his departing figure.

Directly outside the break room, Joel scanned for Megan. True to his expectations, he could see her talking to Bellwood in his office, their heads close together over the desk. He frowned. This troubled him more than he cared to say; like Rafe, he, too, had expected more of her. He wondered if he was seeing the whole picture. Otherwise, it was a sad indictment of the level of mistrust and dissatisfaction that morale in Major Crimes had reached.

He had started back to his desk when he heard his name being softly called, turned and saw the cleaning cart, and the young girl in charge of it beckoning him. He went over.

"You okay, Xui Li?"

"We heard the noise, Mr Taggart. What happened to Jim?"

Joel sighed.

"I'm sorry, Xui Li, but Jim is in... some difficulties. He's suspended right now."

He was about to ask what she wanted him for, but without another word, a worried-looking Xui Li reversed her cart and made off swiftly down the corridor and away from Major Crimes.

## Chapter 12

Lance Prentiss watched his recent table companion leave and sat back, lifting his glass of Chardonnay and taking pleasure from the way the condensation pearly on the outside. Yes, so far things were going pretty well, almost exactly as they had planned, and assisted by the fact that key individuals were unwittingly playing right along, given their recent behaviour. All in all, a bit of self-congratulation was in order.

He sipped at the wine, letting the flavour fill his mouth, and allowed his gaze to run round the wine bar. It was a favourite watering hole for high-rolling lawyers, City Hall lobbyists and up-and-coming young turks on the State political scene – just his kind of people. This lunchtime it was comfortably full of attractive people in expensive suits wielding their cell phones, and their self-important chatter.

As his eyes roved across the bar they stopped short at the sight of a particular female. Very nice. Long, curly, dark hair; trim figure. A pretty face made for smiling. Pert mouth, pert ass, pert... yeah, everything just as he liked it. He rose smoothly and made his way over to lean casually on the bar beside her. She had been playing with the stem of her glass, and didn't look up until he spoke.

"I know this sounds a little hackneyed, but you look kind of familiar. Have we met? Maybe I can buy you a refresher for that spritzer?"

The woman looked up in surprise and flashed him a dazzling smile. Evidently she liked what she saw, too.

"Oh, I don't think we've met. I'm sure I would have remembered. I haven't been in here before – just waiting to see a business contact, but I guess he's been held up."

"Well," said Prentiss, signalling the barman, "that's a downright crime, leaving you on your own. You know, you have a really cute accent!"

The young woman smiled winningly, but looked a little self-conscious at the same time.

"Thanks, but that's not what many people say, and it's a hard accent to drop."

"Works fine with me," smiled Prentiss. "You know, I'm ashamed to say it, but I've never been to Australia..."

\*

Blair sat in the quiet classroom. Not surprisingly, with most of the key drivers languishing in Cascade PD's holding cells, there had been no transports that day to reinforce the fiction of Irene's educational programme.

But he was there in the classroom because he couldn't think of anywhere else to go. He knew he needed to stay in the picture. Running off now wouldn't do anything for his cover, nor would it endear him to Lutsevich. But there was the rub. He fought a rising panic that Lutsevich had already seen through his ruse and was going to link him with the police presence, and then the bust.

Dammit, Jim! Why couldn't you have stayed away like I begged you to?

But overlaying that was a feeling of absolute horror that things had come so close to fatalities last night. It was the danger he'd known about from the start but had chosen to ignore, sick of being told to wait on the side-lines while the adults sorted things out. As far as he could see, Blair Sandburg was a key element in the mess they were all in, so Blair Sandburg had a responsibility to deal with it, as well as a downright burning compulsion to go after the hateful crime for its own sake.

But this had turned into chaos. No-one knew what anyone else was doing, leading inevitably to massive screw-ups like last night; to the potential deaths of his friends.

To Jim's death.

He was cold all over, sick to his stomach. The strong coffees he had been drinking since he had got to the school after his escape from the white van were doing nothing for his equilibrium.

Because his other great fear was that Lutsevich would now be gunning for Blair himself.

Irene looked in through the door.

"Will you calm down? Dmitriy will be out of there in no time. He's got good contacts, and those contacts have got good lawyers."

"Irene, that's what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid he's going to think this is all my fault! That I sold him out! And I didn't! I don't have a clue why the cops turned up last night. But I'm the only one who managed to get away, and I'm afraid he'll think there's something in that. I want to tell him so, but I don't want a bullet in my head. You know what I mean?"

He looked mournfully at her.

She crossed the room and wound her arm around his shoulders. He tried very hard not to flinch away.

"Brad, baby. I'm sure Dmitriy will understand. After all, his contacts will be able to make sure he has all the information he needs to put this right. I wouldn't worry if I were you."

She might have thought she was purring winningly in his ear, but Blair could hear an edge to her voice. Irene Ng was going to be happy to sit on the fence when it came to Blair's fate.



There was a sound from below – someone had activated the electronic lock on the front door. Then there were voices and the tramp of feet on the stairs. Irene moved to stand by the door, as far away from Blair as possible. Blair sat up straight in his chair and clutched his backpack tightly to his chest. It wasn't bullet-proof, nor was it Jim Ellison, but it was something.

Dorfo and Stefan preceded Lutsevich into the room. They were both smiling nastily; Lutsevich was inscrutable. The two goons went to stand either side of Blair, who regarded them nervously. He cleared his throat.

Mr Lutsevich, please believe me. I know it looks bad, but I had nothing to do with last night..."

Lutsevich clicked his fingers and suddenly Dorfo and Stefan lifted Blair bodily from his chair and brought him right up to Lutsevich, who stared down at him, still expressionless.

"You're right about that, Brad. It does look bad. You getting away when I got taken to jail. Lucky for you, I have expensive lawyers and good friends."

"You're bailed?" Blair couldn't help procedural query leaking out.

Lutsevich smiled now, but without humour.

"Free to leave. There was no evidence. In fact I now have a potential suit for unlawful arrest."

Blair gaped.

"Wow, that's... that's amazing! I'm so pleased! But I thought... I mean, I would've guessed the cops would have taken the files."

"There are ways that paper files can disappear, Brad. Ways that people can disappear, too." He gestured again and Dorfo suddenly dragged Blair's head back and laid an open switchblade on his throat.

"So, Brad Somerby, your cop friends not coming to help you this time?"

Blair was gasping.

"Please, Mr Lutsevich! I told you! They're no friends of mine!"

"And here you are. Anyone else would have tried to get as far away from me as possible. This is just your naivete again, Mr Somerby?"

"Mr Lutsevich, I wanted to explain. I knew running would be no good, and anyway, I promise – I did nothing!"

Lutsevich smiled again.

"If I had a dollar for every time someone said that to me... And would you believe, it did them no good at all?"

Blair swallowed painfully.

"Yeah, I believe."

There was a tense pause. Then, all at once, Lutsevich burst out laughing, the switchblade was gone, and Dorfo was slapping Blair jovially and painfully on the back. Even Stefan was grinning awkwardly; Irene's smile was a little less heartfelt.

"Brad, Brad!" said Lutsevich, ostentatiously dusting him down. "I'm not as vindictive as you might think. I know people. I saw how you behaved last night, and how you tried to help. You're not skilled, but that will come with practice. You did your best."

Blair nodded vigorously.

"And anyway," continued Lutsevich, "police interference is an occupational hazard. What you managed to do, however, was of paramount importance. Do you have it?"

Blair stared at Lutsevich, then slowly opened his backpack and pulled out Lutsevich's slim laptop from the warehouse office. Lutsevich took it from his nerveless fingers and handed it over to Dorfo.

"Excellent, excellent. It's all we need to get back into operation with minimum disturbance. I'm already sorting out a new location for us. It should come online in a couple of days. Now, let's discuss the next steps."

He pulled out a chair and invited Blair to sit down again, while he himself took a seat. Blair sat, somewhat shakily.

"Mr Lutsevich, I still don't understand. The PD must have you in their sights. Is it safe to get back in operation so quickly?"

Lutsevich smiled at him.

"Ah, Brad, you don't know what happened at the PD this morning. I doubt the detective who made such trouble for us – your gambling friend – is going to be giving us much attention in future."

Blair stared at him wide-eyed.

"Oh God, what happened to him? I mean ... I mean, no one got hurt, did they?"

Lutsevich shook his head sadly.

"Brad, Brad.... You're going to have to lose that sentimental streak. No, no one was hurt – much". Dorfo and Stefan were chuckled hugely at this. "But it will be all over the evening news. See it in glorious colour then. I promise you, you'll find it very entertaining!"

He sat back and gestured to Irene.

"I'd like a scotch."

"Sure, Dmitriy," she flustered. "Brad, go get..."

"No, Irene," said Lutsevich sharply. "Brad is busy with me. Go get us both scotches. Now, Brad, what are our numbers for the next load?"

\*



Blair got to the bar early. Some customers were watching a rerun Jags game, but he waited it out; the barman always switched to the evening news, even though most of his clients were too far gone to take much notice. At last, the channel was switched and the familiar music played.

Oh, Jesus H Christ. The first item. The very first item.

"There was drama today at Cascade Police Department Headquarters when Mr Andrew Dammer, a flamboyant member of our legal fraternity here in Cascade,

suffered a suspected broken nose after being punched in the face by an on-duty detective. Embarrassingly for the PD, the fracas was witnessed by Police Commissioner Wade, who had been paying a visit, as well as several members of the city's Press corps, who were attending to hear Commissioner Wade speak about community policing. Commissioner Wade's speech was later cancelled.

A spokesperson for the PD said the attack was under investigation, and the officer in question, Detective James J Ellison, had been suspended without pay. An insider, who didn't wish to be named, told us later that Detective Ellison had become a cause for concern, as his behaviour in the PD had been increasingly erratic and unpredictable.

Detective Ellison, a former 'Detective of the Year' and Army hero, achieved notoriety recently amid claims that he possessed superpowers, claims later revealed to be a practical joke. It seems it's a joke that has backfired badly for the detective.

Detective Ellison was not available for comment. Mr Dammer's office informed us that Mr Dammer will be pressing charges.

And now the economic outlook. Will the Jags' recent wins help boost Cascade's manufacturing productivity....?"



Blair stared at the TV in horror, open-mouthed. The news item had been accompanied by a graphic video clip, replayed several times. His eyes went straight to Jim in the huddle of people in the Major Crimes corridor. He saw the exchange – silent on the screen, but Blair could easily lip-read most of it; he saw the punch. But most of all, he saw Jim's extreme reactions; his flinches at the flashguns and the hubbub around him. And he saw his friend's

face; at first distorted with animal rage, then suddenly blank, and then, equally suddenly, like a distressed little boy's.

Jesus God, he's out of control. Why can't he... Why can't he...

The sudden cold realisation swept over him like a wave of ice water. He spun round to leave the bar, only to see Zuckerman approaching with a bland smile on his face.

Blair marched up to him, grabbed his arm hard and snarled in his ear:

"You've got some explaining to do."

If any of the bar's regulars were surprised that one of their number dragged his acquaintance into the dingy corridor that led to the washrooms, they didn't show it. Nor did they seem interested, which was just as well. By the time the connecting door closed, Zuckerman was already on the floor, rubbing his jaw.

"Just what the hell are you doing, Sandburg?"

Oh, the little undercover name fiction had been dropped, had it?

Blair hauled him to his feet again and immediately planted another punch on the man's chin. Down he went with a splutter, and blood appeared around his mouth.

"You bastard! You complete fuck!" shouted Blair. "You never told him, did you? You promised me! It was part of our deal, and you never told him!"

"Sandburg, it wasn't a priority. Can I help it if the man's gone off the rails?"

Blair hauled him up again and slammed him against the wall, breathing into his face.

"You should have listened to me! I told you it was important!"

No point in explaining to Zuckerman what had happened, he would never have comprehended it. But it was clear now to Blair. Stressed, strung-out, separated from his Guide and worried about his friend - something that had been going on for months now, but brought to a head by this latest catastrophe - Jim Ellison was disturbed and disoriented, and his Sentinel abilities were going off the map, taking Jim the man with them.

Blair stared at the gibbering FBI man for a moment with contempt, then pulled him back from the wall and flung him on the floor again. Zuckerman lay there in a crumpled heap, staring up at him.

"Sandburg, you've just assaulted an FBI officer," he mumbled, spitting a little blood. "I could have you arrested for that. You have to wise up. We have work to do."

"Screw you," hissed Blair. "I'll be in touch. Maybe."

And with that he turned on his heel and left the bar.

## Chapter 13

By the time Jim got back to the loft, his mood of optimism and determination had faded. His home felt cold and quiet, no sense of life or comfort. The enormity of what had happened, and what he had done, hit him, and a deep loneliness set in. He walked to the kitchen cupboards, extracted the half-full bottle of Scotch and filled a big tumbler. He knocked it back pretty much in one, and then filled it again, and went to slump on the couch.

How he had got to this state was not a mystery to him now, but he found it difficult to see a resolution. He had relied on Sandburg so much these past few years, more than he had ever really guessed, and he feared for himself should he be unable to regain control of his wayward senses now. But more than that, the rock bottom place where he now found himself forced him to review what had happened in his life. As he looked back over his friendship with Blair, what he saw most of all was Blair's constancy, his devotion, and his strength of will, always helping Jim, never letting him down.

And where did Jim Ellison stand on this? Big man Ellison, so big that he could barely find it in him to say thank you to his young friend for everything that the man had given him; warmth, affection, support, life-saving and sanity-saving guidance. Worse than that, Jim Ellison had stood by while his friend was murdered, and then stood by again, and watched the guy fall on his sword to die once more, this time in a professional sense. So okay, Jim had saved his life a time or two. Hell, Jim had even brought him back from the dead – in many books that might count for something. But Jim knew that Blair's death had been on his watch. He was at best only righting his own wrongs.

He had meant to talk to Blair. Really, honestly, he had meant to talk to Blair. He had meant to say thank you, to own up to his own pig-headedness and lack of gratitude. To thank Blair for just being there, filling Jim's life with warmth and happiness – real happiness, perhaps for the very first time in Jim's adult life. But once again, he had left it far too late. Now, everything he did seemed to be working at cross-purposes with his friend. Whatever he tried to do or say, it all seemed to come back and bite him on the ass. Was it any surprise then that Blair had maybe decided to detach with love, and go his own way? Jim Ellison had been an asshole for too long. The irony was that now he realised it, the only person he could share that realisation with was himself.

He swigged more scotch. If he had the chance to talk to Blair again, he promised himself that he would make good all this confusion and failure to communicate. Christ knows, it would only be what Blair had been telling him to do for years now, to shake himself loose from the mask of repression that he offered to the world. But it hurt too much to do that, it

always hurt too much. People he cared for were going to leave him, it was the way his world worked. And he had always put Blair in that category, without even thinking. Now Blair that had actually left him, he realised how very keenly he missed his friend, and how much he needed Blair back in his life to make sense of things.

Simon had thrown him for a loop, asking about his dreams. Typical Ellison, jumping down the man's throat at the inference that maybe these dreams had been of the erotic kind. What would Blair have called that? A macho cliché of denial, probably. And he'd probably be right. At the time, Jim had been dreaming about loss, and leaving, but since his return to Cascade, the sensual dreams of Blair touching him, ghosting by with a caress of his fingers or the brush of his hair, had increased in frequency. They were both longed for, and slightly feared.

In those dreams what he experienced was always sensual. He dreamt of hair and eyes and skin, of movement and grace. Just where sensual tipped over into erotic, he wasn't quite sure how to define, but he suspected that waking up with a hard-on after a dream like that was a pretty good indicator.

He tipped his head back against the couch and closed his eyes, letting his mind wander. The whisky permeated his body and exhaustion took its toll, and he dreamed.

It wasn't quite one of those dreams, filled with the almost unbearable delight of a sensuous Blair - touching, but never touchable. In fact, he pretty much would have welcomed one of those dreams right now. This was a dream full of worry, like those that had plagued him ever since Spain - no, tell the truth, Ellison, even before then. The feeling it aroused in him now reminded him of his visions in the pool at Sierra Verde; a feeling of looking at the future, or at fate, somehow. It filled him with a heavy dread of its eventuality.

There were deep shadows, but also flashing lights and high-pitched sounds. He knew he was clutching at his ears and shaking his head to get rid of them, but they just got more intense. Blair seemed to be in the middle of this vortex of sound and vision. The sight of him terrified Jim. Again, his face was bloody but resolute, though his eyes were wide with longing. His arms were held out to Jim, but his form was ever-receding, drawing back into the vortex. It got smaller and smaller, disappearing from Jim's grasp.

Jim dashed forward, rushing into the colours and lights, leaping after his friend. He felt his stomach drop away as he fell into black nothingness, only to wake with a jolt. He was sitting on the couch, the scotch glass had upset in his hand, and the room was quite dark...

And there was someone there.

He leapt up, grabbing his handgun from the small table by the couch where he had laid it earlier and went into the stance, training the gun on the intruder who stood at the door, arms raised in supplication.

"Dammit, Jim," said the dark form, "put the gun down! I still have a key, remember?"

Jim froze, then slowly, not taking his eyes off the apparition in the doorway, laid the gun back on the table. The figure lowered his arms, and Jim saw the full horror.

"Jesus, Chief! You cut your hair!"

"That all you can say?"

And in two strides, Jim was across the floor and Blair was in his arms as he lifted his friend bodily and swung him round and round in undisguised glee; laughing, laughing. And Blair was laughing, too, only he had to scrunch his face into the shirt across Jim's broad chest to blot away the sudden tears.

\*

It was some time, and many words, later, and they were both looking rather pink in the eye and red in the face. Blair was openly sniffing, but Jim excelled at stoicism and had done what any stern male would do in the circumstances. He made coffee, Blair having banned any further scotch.

"You're grinning. What are you grinning at? I can see you grinning from here." Jim didn't answer right away, but went back to the couch and handed over the coffee.

"That Big Sur postcard. That was a nice touch. How did you get it there, anyway?"

"That?" Blair took his mug and balanced it on the arm of the couch, caught Jim's look and put it on the side table. "That's was easy. I had a souvenir postcard already. I just wrote the message on it and sent it in an envelope to Lucy - you remember, Naomi's friend, the one she stays with in Monterey - and asked her to air mail it. Told her it was a practical joke."

Jim shook his head, wonderingly. "And then the story about the dig - did you forget you had a cover already?"

"Doofus! I didn't want you two to believe it! I wanted you to realise something was wrong, get you on your guard! Call yourself a detective?"

Jim snorted.

"Call yourself a Brad?"

"Eh?"

"You. Brad. You are so not a Brad, Chief."

Blair looked indignant

"I am, too!"



"No you're not. You aren't a Brad. Brad is a high school jock. Brad is an airline pilot. Brad is a Wall Street trader. You are no way a Brad."

Blair grinned at him and they were both silent for a while, musing. Then Blair spoke up softly.

"And Brad isn't a cop, I guess."

Jim looked hard at him.

"Why do you say that?"

"Jim, you heard what I said that night. I'm sorry you did, but I meant it. Being a rookie cop is boring. I don't mean working to solve crime is boring, no way! I love working with you. I love the work that we do. Really, truly, I want to spend my life doing it. But not as an ordinary cop. I'm sorry. I've been thinking a lot about this. I spent so long building up all my knowledge, making a mark. I can't go back to the beginning again. I can't go back to being on the ground floor, not being expected to use my brain. Not being acknowledged for who I am. And that's what will happen, if I get to be a rookie in the official system."

"You saying cops are stupid, Chief?" Blair turned his head to see Jim looking at him with a twinkle in his eye. "Answer carefully, because some of my best friends are cops."

Blair sighed, and gave Jim a brief smile.

"You know what I mean, man. I don't want to start at the bottom again. I feel like I've wasted so much time anyway, busting my balls in academia. I can't go the long route anymore. Sorry, but I can't. I got to this point now, I need people to say, 'Yeah that's Sandburg. I heard of him. I'm gonna take him at face value.'"

Jim nodded.

"I understand all that, Chief. To be honest, I'd been thinking of it myself. The Academy place was just something that Simon and I dreamt up, really so that you would stay with us. With me. I swear to you, Chief, I was so worried that you'd go. I didn't want to stop being partners with you. Even after all we went through - hell, because of all we went through - I really wanted us to continue. This was the only way I could see how."

Blair looked at him in surprise.

"You really wanted to? I've never heard you say that before, Jim Ellison. You coming down with something?"

Jim frowned at him.

"Don't mock me now, Chief. I swore to myself, if I ever saw you again, I'd try to right all the things I've got wrong over the past months. I need to tell you what's been going on in my

head, because, Christ knows, nothing's been making sense, and it doesn't make sense if I can't talk to you about it. So don't make fun of me, please. It's time I tackled these things. It's time I told you how very much value you. It's time..."

Jim leapt up and started pacing.

"It's time I told you that I want you to stay here. This is your home. I never want you to leave again, Blair. Please, I know now what it feels like to lose you. And I've lost you so many times in the past months. I can't let it can't happen again."

Blair looked sad.

"Senses, huh? I guessed as much, seeing you on the TV and the way you landed one on Andrew Dammer. Everything's got too much for you, I know. You're so mixed up, you didn't even recognise me when I came in tonight. We need to work on getting you back online. I can do that, Jim. I promise you, I've never wanted to let you down, and I won't let you down with the senses as long as you need me...."

Jim whirled on him.

"You still don't understand, do you? Fuck the senses! It's not the senses I'm talking about! It's about you, it's about me! I don't want us to drift apart, Blair. I want us back together. I want you here. Do you understand what I'm saying? I want you here, Blair. To stay with me. Please."

Blair shook his head.

"Jim, you're upset. Please don't talk about this tonight. You'll only regret it later."

Jim grabbed his arms, pulling him up from the couch.

"What the hell are you doing to me, Sandburg? The one time I want to open up to you, and you start telling me I need to watch my mouth? I'm not going regret it! What I will regret, is if you walk off tonight and I've not told you these things."

"Jim..." Blair was looking slightly desperate. "I kind of get it, but I'm still not sure what you're asking me for."

Jim dropped his arms and stepped back.

"I want you to stay with me, please. Don't go away. I can't think of how else to say it."

Blair frowned, but nodded slowly.

"Jim, we can work on this. I know you don't want to be told to be calm, but I think your senses are in such a whirl right now, you don't really know what you're saying. Now, what I

need is for you to lie low right now, try to get your senses stable, work on them by yourself. I need to go finish what I started here. I can't have you putting yourself any more at risk."

Jim shook his head distractedly.

"No, no, you're still not getting it! Why do you have to do this thing on your own? Why is this not about us? Why is this just you? It's both our lives at stake here, whether we're together or separate. You've already told me tonight all the things that are destroying us and the PD. It's my fight as much as yours. You've done so much to get to the heart of it, I know, but it's not safe. You know damn well if you'd told me this before, I would've downright forbidden you to go it alone..."

It was now Blair's turn to yell at Jim.

"That's just it! Why is it always you making the rules? Okay, so you can argue you're older and maybe wiser, and yes, man, you're a cop. Okay, I've said it. You're a cop. I'm not. But you know what? I know a few things too! I've been around the block! I'm doing pretty well on my own right now!"

Blair started to pace in a tight circle round the rug, pulling at his short curls.

"Look – okay - I started this on my own because I needed to do something, to get to the heart of what's happening in the PD. But now I know it's even bigger than that. I need to make sure that you and your skills and your destiny – and dammit, Jim, it really is a destiny, don't ever mock that – that your destiny will be fulfilled. And I swear to you, nothing that happens to me is going to prevent that. If they want to destroy my career again, to take me out of the PD, then let them do it. It was like I said to you that day in Simon's office. I didn't die for the PD, I didn't trash my dissertation for the PD, you know that. You know that, Jim. I did it for you. I will always do that for you. So don't ask me... don't ask me not to do something which I know can help you and keep you safe. Don't ask me to do that, please. Don't think so little of me, and what I've done and what we've done, and all we've been to each other, to ask me to do that."

He put his hands up to his eyes, dashing away new tears. Jim was looking at him, aghast.

"Chief, Chief, I would never want to do that to you, don't you understand? You're so important to me, all I want to do is protect you. I see you out on the street in trouble, I see you dodging bullets, and afterwards I feel a little part of me dies when I think that something could happen to you. Maybe I've pushed you away to stop that happening, but isn't that just like you're doing with me now? Maybe we're both at fault here, but can we just recognise it, please? Can we just think again about this? Because I can't go on like this, Blair. Always at odds with who's pushing and who's pulling, who's in charge, who's got the right of the line. We're both in this, together. We've been in this together from the day we met."

He put out a tentative hand and stroked Blair's arm.

"We belong together, don't you feel that? I've been ducking this is so long - ducking it since way before Alex Barnes. You terrify me and delight me, you scare me to death, you open up my mind and my heart, and I wouldn't have it any other way. It would kill me to lose you, Blair. Don't badmouth me because I care to keep you safe, please. I'm trying my best, I'm working on these neuroses you've nagged me about over the years. But right now things have come to such a brink, I don't trust myself to go on, unless I know where you stand."

Blair was looking at him wide-eyed with consternation.

"Jim, Jim, where's this come from? I never dreamed... I never dreamed..."

Jim gave a snort of laughter.

"Dreams? Jesus, yes, let's talk about dreams! Want to hear about my dreams? Even Simon thinks I should tell you about my dreams! Thank Christ he doesn't really know what my dreams are. My dreams about losing you, about you dying. About me losing you in some whirlpool of nothingness, or running away from me down a street full of sunlight, and disappearing through a door I can't enter. About you, about you – about you looking at me, and all I can feel is your breath on my face, and the beat of your heart, and everywhere I look it's you. And I feel... I feel..."

He dropped his gaze suddenly and put his head in his hands. Blair reached out with a gentle touch, calming him as if he were a wild-eyed horse.

"Jim, Jim, keep a hold of it. Please, man, just breathe with me now, breathe with me. You need to come down to earth, Jim..."

Jim looked up at him again, his eyes blazing, and gripped Blair's upper arms fiercely.

"I don't want to come down. Don't you understand? I don't want to come down. Why can't you see what I'm trying to do here?"

Blair looked at him earnestly.

"Because I don't quite believe it. I can't allow myself to believe it. You don't know, Jim, you don't know how hard this can be. You don't know how hard it's been, keeping up with you. Keeping up with your mood changes, wondering how to keep you happy and sane, then wondering why the hell I'm even bothering."

He shook his head in frustration at himself.

"But in my heart of hearts I know why I bother. I know why. Because it's like you said: you're important to me, too. I don't want to be apart from you, either. I don't understand what it's doing to my life, to our lives. I don't know what happens in the future. I don't know what

this looks like to someone outside our bubble, I don't know, I don't know. I don't even know what it is that I've been daring to hope for all this time. All I know is, right now, this is too, too much for me process, man. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, but I have to think about this. I have to wait till you've got your equilibrium back, so we can talk about this in detail - talk about the future. Talk about me maybe working with you as something else other than a cop. Maybe. Hopefully."

Jim howled at him.

"This is not about the fucking job!"

"Right now, Jim, the job is all I can focus on. Think about what I've told you. Think about what's happening within the PD, to you, to our friends! Think what's happening to innocent people like Lin Xui Li and her brother. All these people, Jim. All these people - we know what's happening to them. We have to do something! I can't lose my concentration now!"

He broke away and made for the door, but Jim reached after him, grabbing his arm.

"No, Blair! Please, stay! There's still so much... so much to say! So much to tell you!"

Blair shook him off again and backed up against the door.

"You think about what you're saying, man. You need to think. Maybe it makes sense to you right now, but you need to think about it in the cold light of day, too. Don't give me false hopes, man. You're not being fair."

Jim towered over him. He gazed now into the wide blue eyes and saw in them so many things; the whirlpool, the Temple, his future.

"I'm no fucking good with words," he growled, and leaned forward, wrapping his arms tightly around Blair's back, pulling the man to him, pressing his lips on Blair's forehead and temple again and again and again. Blair's first reflex was to struggle, but in an instant he relaxed and then, almost as swiftly, increased his grip so that he was holding on to Jim as hard as Jim was holding onto him, twining his hands around Jim's neck to pull in closer. And Jim let his mouth wander down across Blair's closed eyes, down his cheek and onto the corner of his mouth, and then, with a kind of groan that came from somewhere deep inside him - something between resignation and victory - he pressed his open mouth on Blair's lips, feeling Blair's mouth open with the movement. He kissed him. He kissed Blair. He kissed Blair, whom he had wanted to kiss since before he could ever remember, since the beginning of time.

Blair's fingers reached up into Jim's hair, pulled Jim's face even closer to his own. His tongue reached in - everything was hot and wet and full of life; dear God, so full of glorious life! He pulled Blair's torso even closer to him, and felt their bodies align, chest to hip, Blair's legs twining with his.

They parted at last, gasping a little. Jim looked down at Blair, and then at his own hands on Blair's shoulders, the fingers touching Blair's neck, as if he didn't believe they belonged to him. He pulled back slightly.

"Blair, Blair, I'm sorry!"

"Sorry?" Blair's voice was distraught.

"No! I don't mean it like that! I mean - sorry to put you on the spot. I'm sorry if I've upset you. But I'm not sorry I did this."

Jim leaned in again eagerly to Blair's mouth, and his friend responded as before, but then suddenly pulled away, dodging out of Jim's arms.

"No, man, no. Not now. I need to think about this. Later, okay? Later. We need to talk about what you're saying. About what we're doing. But now, we have to concentrate. We have to concentrate on this case."

"Fuck the case! Fuck it, Blair! What are you doing?"

"Trying to be sane. Trying to stay sane."

"Where has that ever got us?"

"Jim, Jim. Everything you said, all of this. I can't tell you... I can't tell you how much...."

He put his head in his hands again.

"Oh, man. I can't stay here right now, I have to go. I'll see you in a couple of days."

Jim pulled his hands gently away, speaking softly.

"Please don't leave now, Chief! Stay with me?"

Blair brought his arms high around Jim's shoulders and pulled the man down for a searing kiss.

"This isn't over, big guy. This isn't even started. I promise you, if you want me to stay, I will never leave you. Never leave you. Now you have to let go, because we've got work to do, man. Because we can't relax until it's all over."

"And then you'll be back?"

"Then I'll be back, Jim. I promise you."

He slipped out of the door. Jim didn't try to follow. Instead, he stood motionless for minutes, just breathing deeply to calm himself, and letting the taste and touch and scent of Blair's last kiss settle on him like a healing mist.

## Chapter 14

Such was the lack of coordination amongst the erstwhile Major Crimes team, no one had thought to tell Simon about Jim's meltdown. Joel thought that Henri had done so, Henri had thought Rafe, and Rafe hadn't thought about it at all. Rhonda had assumed one of the guys had called, but the thought niggled at her overnight, so by 7am she was on the phone to her Captain.

"What the...?"

Simon was dumbfounded. Not only had no one rung to tell him the saga, but he had had an evening of uncharacteristic self-pity. In a mood, sore and depressed after a major bout of physio, he had refused to switch on the TV or radio, taken the phone out of the socket, drunk more than he should have done, and gone to bed early. Consequently he had heard nothing in the media either.

"They're still running it on the news," warned Rhonda. "Watch the breakfast show."

So he did, and was appalled; both by the sorry state of the PD on public show, and by the sight of his confused and angry friend, whose senses looked to have dragged him back to the dark days, before he and Sandburg had got a grip on them. He picked up the phone at once, but Ellison's number wasn't being answered. It figured; he'd probably disconnected it, just like Simon had, though for different reasons. So instead, twenty minutes later, he was hammering on the door of the Loft.

The Jim Ellison who finally opened the door surprised him, though. Not the surly, scowling, acerbic man from years ago. He looked tired – very tired – and there were lines of worry on his brow. But despite that, there was an odd air of excitement, almost euphoria, about him. Letting Simon in, he moved erratically about the Loft, twitching cushions and straightening books in between getting Simon his coffee. When he stood still, his fingers continued the motion with a nervous tattoo against the countertop. Simon was perplexed.

"You sleep any?" he enquired. Jim looked up, frowned and gave him a fleeting wry smile.

"Not much, no."

"Me neither." Simon drank down some of the coffee. He steeled himself.

"You want to talk about it, Jim?"

Ellison looked down at his hands, and then up again. He seemed to be on the edge of laughter; either that, or a nervous breakdown.

"Simon, Sandburg was here."

All at once, Simon understood Jim's behaviour. Thank Christ, he thought, Sandburg's back. Not soon enough to prevent his friend from committing career suicide, but Blair back on the scene was a definite turning point for the poor beleaguered Sentinel. And then Jim started to talk; about Xui Li, about Lutsevich, about the campaign against the PD – everything Blair had discovered. Simon listened, and heard things that dovetailed with the evidence he himself was amassing. Within the hour, they were on the road to Tacoma.

The Tacoma facility might have been described by Immigration as a shelter, but in reality was no more than a holding station. The "Cascade 15", as the Immigration Officer who met Jim and Simon wryly described the group, were currently housed in a dormitory – a long, prefab barrack-type building with basic bunk-beds and ablution facilities. The men were waiting listlessly in the drab surroundings; some dozing, some playing chess or draughts, or reading dog-eared Russian language newspapers.

"They're no trouble," said the efficient Immigration Officer, who had accompanied them to the dormitory. "We're still trying to piece together who they are and where they came from. Most are, naturally, very reticent. They're afraid, quite rightly, that they're due to be repatriated if they're here illegally. But that'll be a long process."

"I'd like to talk to them," said Jim. "I think a few have some degree of English."

The Immigration Officer shrugged.

"Be my guests, Detectives. I'll leave you to it. Holler at the gate when you're ready to go."

Left alone, Jim and Simon approached the group, most of whom were watching them warily. There was one exception, though; a tall, muscular, blond man, about Jim's age and build, who was lying on his bunk, feigning indifference. Jim recognised him as the man who had stood at the front of the group in the trailer the previous night, and who had seemed to be the spokesman. He went up to the man, and sat on the adjoining bunk, which was unoccupied.

"Sir, we'd like to talk to you and your friends about the warehouse in Cascade, where we found you. About why you were there, and where you think you were going."

The other man opened one eye.

"And I speak to you? For why?"

Jim stared steadily at him.

"Because we believe you were brought there under pretence; that you had been forced, maltreated. Because we think the same thing has happened to many young men who are now missing, and their families are desperate to find them."

He paused, and cleared his throat.



"And because a good friend of mine went there to help them, but I think now he's in over his head, and I need to find him."

The man opened both eyes, and raised himself to a sitting position, mirroring Jim's position on the other bunk.

"Missing friend? Brother?"

Jim nodded.

"Brother – like my brother. Like – more than a brother. But many sons and brothers are in the same danger. We..." - he indicated Simon – "... we want to help."

"You are cops." It was a statement.

Jim smiled wryly.

"Yes, that's true, but right now we're cops without badges, because of this. We need your help, sir."

He extended his hand.

"My name is Jim Ellison. I'm a detective in Cascade. That's my boss, Captain Simon Banks."

The man regarded his hand for a moment, then took it and gave a cautious handshake.

"Sergei."

Simon approached, hand held out, and got a similar handshake.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr... er ..."

The man gave a small smile.

"Just Sergei."

\*

Most of the men cleared off into the exercise yard, even though it was cold and raining. A few, clearly close to Sergei and probably his lieutenants, remained to sit at a respectful distance from the group of Jim, Simon and Sergei who were seated at one of the long benches, drinking tea.

"We know what happen," said Sergei. "We know at least some things. In Russian communities, both legals and illegals are forced into work parties – pressures are placed on their families to do so. Then some disappear. Just go missing; never come home, no call, no letter. Gang masters say, don't ask questions, keep mouths shut."

He drank some more tea.

"We watch these things happen. We can't speak to Immigration – too risky. We tried talk to cops in Tacoma – no-one want to know. Then, since four weeks, my brother is taken. Arkady – he 22 years. He my..." Sergei hesitated, looking for the word, "...baby brother."

"Kid brother," supplied Simon, and Sergei immediately grinned.

"Yes, yes, that right! Kid brother. We had come to US with my uncle Piotr..." – he indicated a heavysset man with a scarred face sitting on a neighbouring bench, who nodded in their direction – "...about two years since. We have documents." He frowned. "We had documents. Gang masters took them, we left working like slaves to pay back debts. Then, when Arkady goes missing, my uncle Piotr and I, we must do something."

Uncle Piotr nodded gravely.

"We find out one thing," continued Sergei. "Men from Tacoma are taken on a lorry to Cascade. This is a regular thing. A Belarussian called called Lutsevich – he runs it. So Piotr and me, we and our friends..." – he gestured to the other men on the bunks – "... they all have son or brother or... friend... missing, we find out how to get into illegals transport to Cascade. It costs, but so what? And the men in Tacoma who take them, they don't care what we do. So we get to Cascade, and we are put on transport be taken out of city, into country. We think this may be what happened to Arkady. So, we ready to go, too, and find Arkady."

He paused and gave Jim a rueful look.

"And then, you rescue us, Detective."

Jim closed his eyes and put his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Sergei. So many crossed wires in this..."

Sergei reached out and patted his arm. Jim looked up and saw the man wryly smiling.

"Who knows, Jim Ellison? Who knows what was waiting for us? We were men only, no guns, no cars. We just needed to try."

Jim nodded.

"Want to try again?"

Sergei looked at him sharply, realisation dawning his eyes, and gave him a slow smile. Uncle Piotr rose and delivered Simon a slap on the back which nearly unseated him.

"Yes, Jim. We want to try again."

## Chapter 15

Jim got to Simon's house early and then annoyed his friend greatly by returning to his habitual pacing while they waited.

"Jim, for chrissakes, sit down. I like that carpet. I want to have that carpet for a few years yet."

Jim sat reluctantly, but was soon on his feet again and Simon gave up, and spent the time going over the facts for both their benefits.

"Right, what have we got? Clear indications of a smear campaign against you and Sandburg. Plenty of evidence – though anecdotal and very hard to document – of favours being done, bribes been taken, heavy pressure being applied across the PD, with the net effect of suspects remaining at large and certain large-scale criminal activities going pretty much unchecked. We have Sandburg undercover at the behest of the FBI – the FBI, for god's sake? How does he do it? - We have plenty of evidence of people-trafficking across Cascade and the rest of the state, but also a nasty little twists – extortion from immigrant families, and men effectively being enslaved by the gangmasters to pay off their debts. And on top of that, a series of disappearances. We have a focus – this guy Lutsevich. And Lutsevich's involvement with those missing young men that you Blair were looking into, and this seems to have prompted the campaign to remove you from your jobs.

"So that squares the circle. Whoever is the corrupting influence in the PD – and it looks very likely to be closely connected to Commissioner Wade – is also connected to the people-trafficking and associated crimes. We get to the bottom of that, and it should help us nail whoever has been messing with the PD. Right? I said, 'right?' Jim?"

Jim stopped pacing. He hadn't been listening at all, of course. For the past two days, his concentration had gone completely. The only thing that seemed important, that filled his waking and sleeping hours was Blair. Blair in the loft; Blair, warm and solid, leaning against him as they sat on the couch; Blair, as he listened to Jim's halting description of his feelings and his own uncharacteristically inarticulate response. And then, horror of horrors, wonder of wonders – Blair in his arms, the warmth of his breath and the touch of his lips, his hands around Jim's neck, pulling him closer.

So much had suddenly seemed so clear. Yet, two days later, part of Jim was full of questions and anxieties. Did they really both feel the same way? Was Jim feeling this because of his enforced separation from Blair, the intense worry that had caused now making him overreact? But the other part of Jim's brain, conscious and subconscious, simply kept the sensory experience of Blair Sandburg in a continuous loop, so that Jim's whole existence was overwhelmed by the need to be with Blair again. And now Blair was about to reappear, and Jim was as nervous as a teenager on his first date.

He looked blankly at Simon, having heard the voice but not the words, and then ducked the question.

“They're here.”

Simon cocked an ear, and a few moments later there was a quiet knock at the door. Simon went to open it, while Jim stood in the middle of the lounge, clenching and unclenching his fists.

When Simon ushered the two new arrivals in, it was some consolation to Jim that Blair looked as skittish as he himself felt. After one intense look, Blair averted his eyes and did his best to concentrate on Simon, sitting as far away from Jim as he could. Even Simon seemed to be unwittingly out to make Jim's life as unbearable as possible by continually getting in the way whenever Jim tried to move closer. He gritted his teeth and tried to stay calm.

Simon was clearly delighted to see Sandburg again. He had barely restrained himself from giving the kid a bear hug – Jim could see his friend was itching to throw his arms around Sandburg in celebration, but he guessed Simon felt that would be unprofessional in front of the FBI. Instead, Simon limited himself to frequent pats on the back, beaming at Blair like he was the prodigal returned. Which of course he was, kind of; but Jim wasn't really getting the whole picture with Simon. Banks was downright relieved – Blair's return was a guarantee, in his eyes, that Jim's senses would now be back under control and Ellison the cop would function properly again.

So Banks monopolised Blair's attention, sitting close by and questioning him minutely, while Jim waited impatiently on the side-lines for the chance to be close to Sandburg, to touch him, to reconnect. He burned with that need, and the need to reinforce what they had started the night before. There were so many things Jim now wanted to tell Blair, so many things to confess, to express; to beg for, even. His whole body thrummed with tension, and Sandburg wasn't even looking at him... But, at least, he knew for sure Blair was in the same boat as he was – his friend's heart was going a mile a minute and there was a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead, even though the evening was cool.

Blair's heart wasn't the only one beating fast. With gratitude, Jim turned his attention to Zuckerman, who sat primly on the couch beside Blair as his friend recounted the story so far to Simon, mercifully leaving out the emotional meltdown of their reunion at the Loft. Zuckerman added his own dry commentary and explained his intended next steps. What he didn't say much about was where the whole case had come from. Jim was about to ask a searching question when Simon dived straight in.

“Clarify something for me, Agent Zuckerman. You say your authority comes from the regional A.D., but I don't get the scale of this operation. It only seems to be you. Now, we all know from our day jobs how you guys only work in packs. Where's your support?”

Zuckerman gave a thin smile.

"My colleagues and I like to maintain a low profile. I can assure you I have resources enough at my disposal. They don't need to be visible."

Jim saw Blair give Simon a quick look from under his eyelashes, as if to say 'believe that, and you'll believe anything'. And to reinforce the unconvincing nature of Zuckerman's story, Jim sensed that the man's heart particularly started to race when he was describing his authority and the history of the operation – what details he deigned to give, that is; the man was pretty much a fan of the "need-to-know" concept, which clearly irritated Simon in the extreme.

"Well," said Jim's boss heavily, "I guess we'll leave that point there now. Next steps: we agree Jim will aim to infiltrate the next load coming up from Tacoma, with the intention of getting into the group that will lead onto where the missing men got taken. Blair, you'll get him the first part of the way with this."

Blair nodded, giving Jim a quick smile and then looking away again quickly and... blushing? What – the guy blushed? Jim suddenly felt short of breath, and had to concentrate very hard to grasp what Simon was now asking him.

"I said, 'how shall we manage the backup, Jim?'" asked Simon, clearly for at least the second time.

"Ah." Jim shook himself a little. "Ah, we get Henri and Rafe as backup at Lutsevich's base, and Blair and me can wear electronic trackers. If we don't ourselves get on that transport, we can get a tracker to one of the other men. Hopefully that will work."

He saw Simon looking at him strangely, but before he could comment, Zuckerman spoke up.

"I don't like the idea of other Major Crimes personnel being involved."

Simon turned swiftly on the FBI man.

"Oh, you don't? Well, let me tell you, Agent Zuckerman, Detectives Rafe and Brown I would trust with my life. So would Ellison and Sandburg. Which is more than I can say for you and your invisible colleagues. So they'll be there."

Blair spoke up.

"Hey, Simon, I have this work I was doing, about Wade and all his business interests." He pulled a wad of papers out of his backpack. "Bob here was going to help me with some more data, but that hasn't really worked out, has it, Bob?" He gave Zuckerman a pointed look. "I'm convinced if we follow the paper trail of company ownership, we'll get a lead on who's calling the shots."

Simon took the proffered papers.

"I'll get Joel to start digging."

"Oh, no!" said Zuckerman. "I don't want yet another third party involved!"

"Tough," said Simon bluntly. "You're dealing with the Major Crimes family here. We're a job lot."

He turned to Blair.

"Anything else we need to know about, Sandburg?"

Blair gave him a strange look.

"You look kinda preoccupied," explained Simon.

Blair gave him a rueful grin. "Well, if you must know..."

Jim held his breath.

"... this woman I work for. Well, started working for; Irene Ng. She's been keen to hook up with me..."

Simon rolled his eyes.

"... but I told her I wasn't interested - several times, in fact. That did not go down well. Plus, I mainly work for Lutsevich now, and she resents that, too, I think. She's been pretty inquisitive in the last days; about what I do when I'm not working, who my friends are, that kind of thing. Much more so than she used to be." He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think it's anything - nothing I can't handle, anyway."

Zuckerman gave all three of them a hard look, and then stood and handed Simon a card.

"Thank you for your assistance, Captain Banks. Here my details. Please keep all contact to a minimum. Sandburg and Ellison can brief me when they have a lead on the Tacoma shipment."

"Sure thing, Bob," said Jim with a false smile, giving him a salute.

Zuckerman glanced at him with distaste and took his leave.

\*

When Simon returned after letting Zuckerman out, he found Blair and Jim on opposite sides of the room, barely looking at each other. The tension in the air was palpable. Simon regarded them closely, but couldn't discern why they were so on edge. He found it

surprising; they had barely seen each other for two months now and he'd have predicted they would have been in each other's pockets as soon as they met.

Unless they'd had a disagreement, of course. Jim had been pretty pissed at Blair's headstrong personal campaign. But this didn't feel like animosity. This felt like...

Oh. Oh, holy shit.

"Look," he began haltingly, "do you guys want some time..."

"No," said Blair, abruptly grabbing up his bag. "I've got to go. Early start, late working tomorrow, new people coming in, and the next day should be Tacoma. I've got to get going."

When Jim spoke, his voice sounded cracked and hoarse.

"Chief, please, won't you stay awhile?"

Blair flashed him a quick, embarrassed smile.

"Seriously, guys, I'm out of here. I'll contact you as soon as I know."

He made the door, brushing past Jim as he did so. Jim grabbed his arm.

"Blair..."

Blair looked quickly at Simon, then placed his hand over Jim's.

"Later, Jim. I promise," he said quietly. "Right now, I've got to concentrate. Got to get moving."

For a long moment he stared straight into Jim's eyes, possibly their first real connection of the evening. Then he gently disengaged Jim's hand.

Had these guys talked about... things? Oh, these guys really needed to talk....

"Simon, goodbye. Jim, be careful. I'll be looking out for you."

\*

Simon returned from closing the front door to find Jim still rooted to the spot. He gave Simon a haunted look.

"I know," said Simon briskly, deliberately misunderstanding. "I don't go a bundle on Zuckerman either, but we're building something here. I think it's worth pushing on with it, as long as you and Blair are careful. But the slightest sign of trouble, you need to get out fast. Remember, Rafe and Brown will be there to give you back-up."

Jim nodded vaguely.

"Jim..." began Simon, somewhat against his better judgment. "... have you and Sandburg talked about... you know...?"

Jim looked at him in horror.

"'You know', what?"

Simon lost his nerve, and prevaricated.

"Your dreams, visions, all that Sentinel stuff. It's been eating away at you, I know. Sandburg can help you now, yeah? It's good you're both back together. You know, as a team..."

Jim gave Simon another look which unsettled him even further. He tried another tack.

"Look, Jim, you're my friends. I know you both well. There's something bugging you both and you need to get it out in the open. You've both had so much to deal with over the past months, it's bound to have put a strain on your friendship. Those things happen. Sometimes things change, maybe for the better. As soon as this is over, you two really need to get together and talk."

"Yes, Simon," said Jim heavily. "It's long overdue."

When Jim left some minutes later, Simon found he still had no idea whether his message had got through.

## Chapter 16

When Blair got back to the high-rise, he didn't switch on the lights, but instead walked straight to the big windows and looked down into the street. He didn't have long to wait to see the figure he knew would be following him. Moments later the buzzer in the lobby sounded, and he went to the intercom.

"Let me in."

"What the hell are you doing here, man?"

"Let me in, Sandburg."

Blair groaned in exasperation and pressed the lock button. He heard the elevator hum and then Jim's soft tread down the carpeted hall. He opened the door, and Jim walked straight in.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Blair repeated, shaking his head violently. "You know you shouldn't be here, Jim. We don't have time for this. We've got too much to do to get side-tracked."



Jim turned and stared at him. The room was dark to Sandburg, but to Jim, everything stood out a strange kind of sepia relief. He had come here feeling angry, let down, and desperately wanting some kind of answer from Blair. The hours since their meeting in the Loft had brought him from high expectation right down to ominous dread. He wanted to understand, and now he looked into Blair's face, he understood only too well. Confusion, doubt, hope; oh, Jim could recognise all of those.

It was a human response, and who could blame Blair for that? Years of waiting, years of knocking his head against the brick wall that was Jim's repressed psyche, meant that Blair's natural optimism and openness was tinged with a once-burned kind of caution, that what you saw in Jim Ellison may still be not what you ever got. And his heart broke, for the both of them. How much time he'd wasted, how much pain he put them both through... He felt grief flow straight through him, like a body blow, and he dropped to his knees in front of Blair, who looked at him in horror.

"What the hell, man? What is this? Please don't do this, Jim! Don't do this, please. Be strong for me, Jim! I need you to be strong. Don't put all this on my shoulders, man. It's not fair. Please, please, you have to help me here!"

Jim reached up and took Blair's hands and brought them to his lips, kissing the fingers. He heard Blair groan with a kind of exasperated anguish.

"Stand up, man, please?" He pulled at Jim's hands and Jim reluctantly rose, but leaned forward and brought their joined hands to Blair's face, brushing them against his lips. Blair saw Jim smile.

"I can be strong, Sandburg. You can lean on me, I promise. Even when I'm being an ass-hole, even when I'm crying into my Scotch, I'll always be strong for you." He detached his hands, and let them fall on Blair's shoulders, rubbing gently.

"I came here full of doubts, full of nerves," he continued, his voice soft. "And now I'm here, and you're with me, everything falls into place. You know what I mean? Everything falls into place. I don't want to be anywhere else. I don't want you to be anywhere else. Wherever thou goest, yeah, Chief? Just take me along with you, okay?"

His friend blinked at him, and averted his eyes.

"You know what really terrifies me about all this?" Blair said slowly. "It's that I've never been lost for words. I can't remember when I've been lost for words, ever. And now I need them, now I need those words – words that I've been rehearsing for ages and ages to tell you - they won't come out! I can't find them! They're lost somewhere, tied up in my brain, tied up in my tongue. I don't understand it. Words ... words are my friends, words are my ... dammit ... words are my ammunition, my weapons, my armoury. At least, they would have

been. Right now, I've got nothing. I've got nothing to stand behind. You've got me defenceless, Jim. You've made me defenceless."

Jim started to smile in spite of Blair's distress.

"I'll tell you something even more crazy about this," he replied gently. Right now you can't find words, but damned if they aren't coming to me a dime a dozen. Think about it. Think about what you just said. Why do you need defences? You don't need defences against me. You and me, we're our defence against the world. You and me for the tribe, Chief. You and me against everyone else. You and me, and no one can beat us.

"And you said, too – you said there was no time to deal with this. Can you even hear yourself - how unlike you that is? That's always been my problem, I never made the time for this, for telling you the important things. I've said it so much you believe it yourself now. Oh, I know..." he continued, seeing Blair's confused look. "I know what you're thinking. Okay, so you never asked outright. But don't tell me you wouldn't have wanted me to talk to you like this months ago, years ago. And I never saw the need until now. I never saw the absolute fucking essential... essential... essentialness of it until now."

He caressed Blair's face; Blair could only stare at him in surprise.

"If you don't have words now, maybe I can speak them for you, Chief?" Jim was smiling outright now. "If you want words, how about "love"? How about "us"? How about "forever"? Is that too much? Are they too big to deal with? They work for you? Because, you know, if they're too much to handle, I can always help. You can always rely on me. I promise."

Blair's mouth was turning upwards into a beatific smile.

"And you say you're no good with words? Man, you are the words-master!"

Jim matched his grin and leant forward, pressing his forehead against Blair's.

"You want more words, Chief?"

"Words," repeated Blair, sliding his arms around Jim's back while appearing to give some serious consideration to the concept. "You can have too damn much of them."

Suddenly he tightened his embrace, like he was drowning in a stormy sea and Jim his only hope, and in one swift movement wrapped his legs tightly around Jim's waist. Jim knew then exactly the words the man was saying.

Jim bent again, opening his mouth and pressing his lips to Blair's, thrusting his tongue against the other man's. Then he broke free and dragged his mouth down over Blair's neck - feeling his pulse, feeling his spine arch into his embrace, feeling the man's hardness against his own belly as Blair pulled his legs even tighter around Jim's hips. Jim shifted its grip, his

arms now solidly around Blair's back, and carried him through the lounge into what he guessed was Blair's bedroom. He dropped Blair gently on the wide bed, Blair letting go with his legs at just the right time.

"You got time for this now, Chief?"

They grinned at each other.

"Shut the fuck up, Ellison, and get that shirt off now. And everything else."

And that was it. They were maybe the last sensible words they managed for some while. Jim, naked and strong in the darkness, stripping Blair and laying him flat – spreading him out for the taking; it was everything Blair had wanted, everything Blair had dreamed. He held his arms out to this beautiful man who knelt before him and murmured:

"Come to me, come to me..."

Jim seized his hands and covered them with kisses, and then he pushed Blair down, all his weight across Blair's body – the most delicious burden of all. Their fingers intertwined and Blair raised their arms over his head, lifting his legs and wrapping them again around Jim's torso, pulling tight; pulling their cocks hard together, moving his hips to start a friction that he knew neither of them would be able to bear for long. Jim's mouth never left Blair's skin; lips on his throat, on his nipples, his belly, ghosting over his cock, his tongue searching in the gully between thigh and hip.

There was no time to wonder at this, to wonder at the sensual man released from the apparently stony facade that was Jim Ellison. Blair knew for sure that man had been there all the time, and his own heart swelled and sang with the pure joy that was the touch of Jim Ellison; the slide of his skin, the caress of his tongue, his scent, his strength. Finally, when neither of them could barely hold out any longer, Jim pulled back slightly to gaze at the man beneath him. In the weak light that seeped into the room, Blair could see his eyes dark with lust, and something else - something Blair had never seen in any other lover. A kind of veneration, a kind of adoration; and Blair knew just what it was, because he knew the same emotion had been shining from his own eyes for Jim Ellison all these years.

They rolled, and now Jim gloried in the sight of the man above him, face flushed with desire. There was no long hair as in his dream, but this was so much better. He ran his hands along the hard muscles with their dusting of soft hair, and as Blair moved over him, brushing over his skin, it was like some kind of exquisite pleasure torture; everywhere he touched felt like fire, and Jim's whole body was now burning.

"You know, don't you? You know I do?"

Jim was smiling, and Blair smiled too, fully in tune with Jim's joke. Who needed words?

"I know, man. Me, too."

Jim turned him over, pressing down again, and Blair's back arched. Their mouths stayed locked together as their hips moved, harder and harder until Blair's cry on his release was almost a scream, and when Jim came, moments later, it was with a guttural moan, like the roar of a big cat.

\*

"I have to go. You know I have to go."

Jim and Blair lay side-by-side in bed, both staring at the ceiling, though their hands were entwined. Jim's face was deadpan.

"You bastard! You are so full of it! You're just getting your own back!" Blair rolled and positioned himself across Jim's chest, pinning him to the bed. He grinned down at him.

"Hey, you know, our esteemed Commissioner Wade was right! I really have corrupted your morals!"

Jim snorted with laughter.

"Yep, I'm a fallen man..."

Blair darted in for a quick kiss and then pulled back again, pouting winningly.

"You really have to go, man? Surely you can stay a bit longer? We've barely started this. Jesus, there's so much of you, I want my money's worth."

Jim grinned and rolled again so that Blair was now under him. They kissed for a while.

You'll get your money's worth, Sandburg." he replied eventually. "Don't worry about that."

Blair gave him a wicked look.

"Well, let's not take too long about it. You're getting on as it is."

Jim went for his ribs, and Blair erupted in laughter.

\*

"You know I've got to go."

Blair was leaning against the door frame, watching Jim put on his jacket.

"I know, man, I'll see you tomorrow."

Jim bent and kissed him again, and disappeared down the corridor.

Blair moved to the window and watched him go, exchanging a salute when Jim looked up from the sidewalk. If Blair's heart was brimming, Jim's heart and brain were full to bursting.

So maybe it was understandable that neither of them noticed the figure in the shadows watching him leave on that wet night.

## Chapter 17

She was another person not noticed. In fact, not many people did bother to notice her, or her colleagues, especially on the evening shift. San'bur had been different, and because of San'bur, Jim was nice. Nice man, lovely smile. And Captain Joel, always smile and hold the door open for her. And pretty Megan with her funny sayings, making the men all chuckle. She gave Xui Li perfume last Christmas-time, too. Nice people. Nice like her family. Now they all look sad and anxious and angry, too, like they had people missing from their family, just like Xui Li.

Henri Brown and Rafe were talking quietly together, then Henri's cellphone rang and he answered and grinned happily at Rafe, giving him a thumbs-up. They both listened to the phone, and Henri scribbled things on the paper in front of him.

They were very quiet; Major Crimes was quiet. Pretty Megan was working at a desk, making sure she didn't look like she was listening to the other two, but Xui Li could see her head slightly cocked.

Then Henri said:

"That's cool, man, See you later," and put down the phone, grinning at Rafe.

"All on for tonight, buddy!"

Rafe gave him a sign that said 'keep your voice down!' So Henri's voice dropped to a whisper, but Xui Li could still hear him.

"All on for tonight! Let's go tell Cap'n Banks and sort out the last details."

The elevator doors opened, and Joel emerged, bearing a large carrier bag marked 'Gino's doughnuts'. He lifted a large display box out of it and placed it, open, on one of the central filing cabinets.

"Help yourself, folks," he noted to the largely empty room, but a couple of Major Crime personnel went to choose a snack.

Joel continued to Henri's desk and placed the bag on the floor. Xui Li could see pretty Megan straining to see without being seen. Then all three men turned, and caught her looking. There was a moment of stony silence, and then Megan hissed "Oh, for gods sake!", grabbed her purse and stormed out of the room.

The three men heaved a collective sigh.

"This is getting a bit obvious," complained Rafe.

"What's obvious?" asked Joel sweetly, "Her or us? Try to be a bit more subtle, you two. You're still detectives, not wonder-boy secret agents."

He reached into the bag and extracted another, smaller one. Rafe lifted the contents partially out, to look at them, but on a warning frown from Joel let them fall again. He snuck a guilty look at Bellwood's office.

"Don't worry, Joel," said Henri. "Bellwood's had meetings all afternoon. He's still downstairs."

"Even so, be careful, you guys," sighed Joel. "Okay, here are your receivers and the bugs. I've just got them from Murphy in Support and he promises me they are new and fully charged. There's pinpoint accuracy within 25 miles, and more general directional indicators up to 50. There's no reason we should lose our guys, okay?"

Henri and Rafe both nodded.

"Okay," continued Joel. "So you get these to Simon. Have you got the rendezvous location?"

"The guys have that, and we've just been looking at the map of the distribution centre where Lutsevich is holed up now. Rundown place, owner went bust. Info courtesy of you-know-who."

Henri winked, and Joel rolled his eyes.

"Okay," he sighed. "You better get on your way. I'll track down Megan and try to keep her busy while you make your exit. We don't want any unnecessary questions right now."

He patted both of them on the arm.

"Be careful, boys. And look after our guys."

"Sure thing, Joel."

A moment later they were gone, leaving in opposite directions down the corridor. Major Crimes was briefly deserted, apart from a couple of Admin girls boredly filing stuff. Xui Li pushed her cart towards Brown's desk and started ostentatiously brushing around it, though given Henri's love of pastries, extra brushwork was always required. No-one looked her way. On the second pass, she leaned over the desk and pressed Brown's computer keyboard. It hadn't been shut down – it was only sleeping! Immediately the screen lit up showing a detailed map and layout of some large buildings. Cautiously she scrolled down the page. There! There was the address!

She grabbed a duster, swept cake crumbs from the desk and onto the floor and at the same time pressed the power button hard. The screen shut down.

Xui Li and her cleaning cart left Major Crimes somewhat faster than they had arrived.

\*

Blair pulled off at the interstate junction and took the van down a service track, stopping finally near some rundown farm buildings that screened them from the road. He switched off the ignition, and turned to Jim and Sergei who had been riding in the front with him.

"Time to get in the back, guys."

Sergei smiled ruefully.

"This made a good change from me," he joked, and slid out of the cab to walk round to the rear of the van and open the doors. For a moment Blair and Jim were alone in the cab.

"You got your tracker?" asked Blair, staring straight ahead through the windshield.

"Uh-huh, stuck to my shirt as instructed. You got yours?"

"Uh-huh."

Jim's hand stole over and pressed Blair's thigh. The other man glanced across to see Jim grinning at him. He covered Jim's hand with his own and smiled back.

"You remembering?"

Jim grinned.

"Oh, yeah."

"Still can't quite believe it." Blair was smiling openly now.

"That it was so good?"

"That it took us so long."

"Long, Chief? I don't remember it taking that much time."

Blair pulled his hand away and slapped Jim.

"You know what I mean, you jerk! Took so long to face up to it, to say something to each other. Look at what we've had to go through!"

Jim grabbed at Blair's pointing finger, and brought their joined hands up to his mouth. He breathed on Blair's fingers, and Blair shivered.

"Don't want to discuss the past. Just want to talk about the future." He kissed Blair's hand, and Blair smiled, his eyes full of tenderness.

"That works just fine for me."

There was a rap at the window, and Piotr's grinning face appeared.

"You lock us in, yes? Jim, too?"

"Yes, Piotr," sighed Blair resignedly. "Jim, too."

\*

Sometime later, Jim heard an approaching vehicle – another truck. Jim was now with the other ten men in the back of the van. He couldn't see what was going on, but he could certainly hear. Blair had got out of the cab to greet the newcomers, and Jim could hear his voice.

"Hey, Franzl. How's it going?"

"Why we meeting here, Brad? I never stop on way to Cascade before."

Jim heard Blair sigh.

"Yeah, well, the problem with routines is that they help us get caught. Mr Lutsevich wants big changes since that shakedown a few days ago. He's moved location. Now we're going to change vehicles more often."

"Well, it's a pain in the ass!"

"You don't like it, you take it up with Mr Lutsevich. Now, are you riding with me to Cascade, or Sonny?"

"Sonny, he do that. I take the truck back."

"Okay, man. Let's load and be gone."

The rear doors of the truck opened and two suspicious faces peered in from the night.

"Hey, there's guys in here already!"

"Franzl, what did I tell you? We're shaking everything up. I brought these guys in from a Portland load. It doesn't matter where they come from – we're only concerned where they get to, right?"

Franzl shrugged.

"If you want. Come on, you jerks, get on board."



And the back of the van slowly filled with another ten or so men from Franzl's truck. A while later, they were underway again. From his position to the fore of the container, his back to the cab, Jim could hear Blair break into song:

"Once, I had a secret love ..."

Jim had to bury his head in his arm and bite hard on his sleeve to stop his laughter bubbling up.

\*

Irene Ng paced in front of her wide windows yet again. She couldn't settle. She'd been seething about this all day. She knew something had been going on! She felt slighted – she given this guy a chance and how had he shown his gratitude? Only by turning into Lutsevich's blue-eyed boy, excluded her from Lutsevich's inner circle, that's how. But even worse – he had rejected her. Rejected her - Irene Ng! Unbelievable!

She knew that Somerby had something up his sleeve. He must have, to turn her down so many times. It was insulting, to be rejected by a boy like that! She knew there could be no rational reason for it. So what that she checked up on his apartment? It was a good thing she had done. She needed to know what was going on. And she'd seen this guy who visited him – stayed most of the night, too. Fag! The little fag! Dmitriy wasn't going like that. He wasn't going to like that his new boy had a cop for a friend! All that crap about him owing money to that cop that turned up at Dmitriy's warehouse! Unless that big detective was taking repayment in kind, the two were a whole lot more than friends. Serve the little fag right. He should never have turned her down. No one insulted Irene Ng that way!

And to rub salt into the wound, Dmitriy had been refusing to take her calls all day, like she would never have anything important to tell him! How dare he! She always kept their contact to a minimum, so now that she really needed to speak to him, why was he being so remote? It was the little fag's doing, that's why. Making sure Irene was kept out in the cold. Well, she knew where Lutsevich would be that night, and she was damn sure she was going to serve Brad Somerby up to him on a plate!

\*

She found it in the basement of the Golden Pagoda, covered in an oily sheet – Feng's motor scooter. She checked it over – everything looked like it should, like it did when she and Wei Long used to ride on rare evenings with their cousin. There was enough gas, and the oil was okay. She heaved it out and, as quietly as she could, hauled it up the stairs and onto the street. It was already dark, and the stalls were closing down. No one really noticed her. She kicked the motor couple of times and it coughed into life surprisingly quickly. Feeling triumphant, she pulled her jacket collar up, and wound her dark scarf around her face. Then,

with a final check to make sure no one saw her, she pulled out into the street and made off into the evening traffic.

\*

"Will you stop checking that thing? It's fine."

"You reckon? I can't pick up their signal, Henri!"

"Maybe they're still out of range. Blair will be using a roundabout route, not straight up I-five. Maybe they haven't switched them on yet."

"Maybe these things just don't work."

"Oh for Pete's sake, man, stop worrying! We checked them at the Cap's house. They worked fine then. It will be okay, okay?"

Rafe pointedly didn't answer. Henri sighed and turned to study the storage complex again with his binoculars. Their position on a neighbouring building gave them a clear view of the facility's doors and vehicle ramps. Their own car was hidden amongst the storage containers and dumpsters stacked nearby.

"Gimme the binoculars," said Rafe, trying another tack and holding out his hand.

"You don't need to check. I just looked. Quiet as the grave."

"Don't say that..."

"How much longer?"

"We still got hours, Henri. I don't need to check my watch."

There was a pause.

"We should have asked Grace and Thursby to help," said Rafe flatly.

"Too risky, man. They're in enough trouble as it is."

"Oh, and we aren't?"

"Shut up, Rafe. Check that monitor again."

## Chapter 18

Blair felt excitement and anxiety in equal measure as he drove the truck between Dorfo and Stefan, who were out watching at the front of the storage complex, and pulled it into Lutsevich's new location. He was excited to be close to the final part of this op – he had a

strong feeling they were going to get lucky tonight. Even if he didn't wangle his way into the transport out of the city, getting Jim on it would be easy. In charge of paperwork, Blair could pick and choose the men he knew would fit what Lutsevich wanted.

His anxiety was twofold. He was deeply unhappy that, for the first time, he'd be responsible himself for sending migrant men out of the city to wherever all the missing young workers had gone, and he still had no idea what happened to them there. Secondly, he was worried as hell about Jim's role in this, the man insisting on putting himself into the transport.

Please, God, let nothing go wrong. Not now; not now he and Jim had finally taken that leap together, and realised it was something so right, so true, and that they had should have done ages ago.

He couldn't help smiling at the memory. His body still tingled, every time he thought about Jim touching him, kissing him, holding him. He hoped to God not many nights would pass before Jim did very same things again to him, and more often.

Dorfo banged the window.

"You asleep, man?"

Blair was jolted back into reality, and climbed down from the cab.

"These guys are all processed. You want to transfer them over to the next truck?"

"Yes, boss," mocked Dorfo, bowing and scraping. "Yes, boss."

Blair flicked him a two-fingered salute.

"That's enough, Dorfo!"

Lutsevich's voice echoed from the concrete walls. The man was leaning over one of the walkways that ran along the sides of the storage area.

"Yes, boss. Sorry, boss."

"Brad, come here."

Blair plastered on a bright smile, climbed up to the walkway and presented himself and his file to Lutsevich.

"I've got twenty here, Mr Lutsevich. All meet the specs. Can we load up?"

Lutsevich glanced in the folder and then let his eyes run over the new group of men.

"Yes, they look okay. Load them up."

He turned to go.

"Mr Lutsevich," Blair started hurriedly. "Mr Lutsevich, I wondered – can I take this load out? We did kind of talk about me doing this before. I've never seen that route, or where the load goes."

Lutsevich turned back to him.

"Why would you want to do that?" he asked curiously. Blair shrugged.

"Call it academic interest?"

Lutsevich barked out a laugh.

"No, Brad. Maybe I didn't explain. It's not my call. The client sends his own driver, as you see." He gestured to a thick-set man sitting in the corner. "Stick to your own job."

Blair bit his lip.

"Okay, Mr Lutsevich, but..."

There was a sudden disruption of the front of the complex and Irene Ng burst in through a side door, with two of Lutsevich's guards trying to hold her back.

"Let me go!" she spat at them. "I need to speak to Dmitriy!"

She turned and pointed at Blair.

"Dmitriy, that man is dangerous! I've seen him - I've seen him with that cop! The one that busted you! They're friends, Dmitriy! They're really good friends, you know what I mean? Your business isn't safe with him!"

Lutsevich reached out and grabbed Blair's arm. His grip was vice-like.

"Is this true, Brad Somerby?"

Blair turned in horror to him.

"Me, Mr Lutsevich? Me? No fucking way! Irene's just got it in for me because I ... you know, I ... I didn't want to date her, okay? She's just making it up!"

Lutsevich released Blair's arm, which he rubbed surreptitiously. He sought out Jim's face in the crowd of men, now on the ground at the doors of the second truck. Jim was looking very worried. Blair gulped a bit.

Lutsevich was talking to Irene now, in a voice that dripped with menace.

"So he doesn't want to sleep with you, and you figure he has to suffer for that? Are you getting hysterical, Irene? Remember, you are the one who recruited him. Any mistake is yours."

"I swear to you, Dmitriy! Maybe he fooled me, but I don't want him to hurt you!"

"Oh, shut up, you moronic bitch!" Lutsevich was all venom. He waved at his men. "Get her out of my sight! I'll deal with her later."

Irene struggled with the two men who took her arms.

"Let me go, you bastards! You'll regret this, Dmitriy! You need to listen to me!"

Against his better instincts, Blair began to feel anxious for Irene. Was Lutsevich about to remove her for good? Again he sought Jim's eyes, and saw his friend give a small shake of his head.

Stay clear. That was the instruction.

Irene was still being manhandled, and Blair himself had just gathered his wits again, when there was yet more disturbance, and the final two of Lutsevich's guards appeared, carrying what appeared to be a large fish, such was its leaps and struggles in their arms. They threw their burden on the floor in the centre of the building. The bundle sat up slowly, and looked around her.

Blair's eyes went wide with horror.

Lin Xui Li. Oh, holy Christ, how did she get here?

He looked over to Jim, and found his friend's face shut down and neutral. Blair tried to follow suit, but instead he could feel the panic mounting.

"What the hell is this?" demanded Lutsevich. "You bring this chaos in here?"

"Sir," protested the taller guard, "we caught her prowling around the building."

"And you bring her here?" Lutsevich's face was growing red with rage. "You bring her here so that she sees everything? I'm surrounded by idiots! Get rid of her!"

Blair started forward, and then checked himself. Once again, he found himself in a crisis of conscience, and this time little Xui Li's life could be on the line. Xui Li, for her part, stood and looked around her defiantly.

"You take my brother! You take him away! I want my brother back!"

Her gaze stopped as she recognised Blair. There was a moment of stupefied silence, and then it burst out of her.

"San'bur! San'bur! You are here! You are..." And her voice trailed away. She clamped a hand to her mouth as she recognised her mistake; too late, the words were already out.

Lutsevich looked from her to Blair, who was trying to sneak a covert look to Jim. Before he could succeed, a signal from Lutsevich brought Dorf and Stefan to his side. He was gripped by merciless hands and a handgun shoved up against his chin.

Lutsevich moved towards him.

"What does she say, Brad? Is there now someone else here who tells me you are not who you say you are?"

Blair tried his best to act aggrieved.

"How the hell do I know, Mr Lutsevich? I don't know who the hell she is – some crazy off the street, maybe?"

"So you are someone called 'Sanbur'? Not Somerby?"

"She's got it all wrong, Mr Lutsevich! I don't have a clue who she is, and she sure as hell doesn't know me!"

"No!" shouted Xui Li, desperately trying to make it right, and making it completely worse in the process. "No! I'm sorry, I don't know him!"

Lutsevich was exasperated.

"Is this a circus? Is this an entertainment?"

He snapped his fingers and pointed at Xui Li. At once, the tall guy who held her brought his gun to her temple. Lutsevich turned to Blair.

"There is one way to settle this. You tell me the truth, or he shoots her now."

The gun was removed from Blair's neck. He swallowed, and stared straight ahead; not looking at Xui Li, not looking for Jim.

"Well, Brad?"

Blair heard a chamber click; the gun pointed at Xui Li was cocked. He took a shaky breath and looked straight at Lutsevich.

"My name is Blair Sandburg, and I'm a cop. Please let her go."

Instantly, Lutsevich lashed out with a punch to Blair's stomach that had him doubling up. The man followed it with a vicious blow to Blair's chin. Blair's head snapped back. Lutsevich rubbed his knuckles, and Blair lifted his head and grinned ferally at him.

"We've got you, Dmitriy! Doesn't matter what you do now, we've got you! We know everything about your operations here! They'll put you inside, and you'll never see the light of day again!"

Lutsevich lashed out once more with a vicious backhand across the face, and Blair couldn't help but sag in his captors' arms. His head was ringing, but he was vaguely aware of a commotion amongst the migrants, and Lutsevich's men started shouting threateningly at them.

C'mon, Henri, he thought vaguely. Time to roll...

"This one..." said Lutsevich, a little breathless from his exertions. "...This one we take to the ranch. Our client will want to deal with him personally. And permanently. The two women – take them out and kill them."

Blair's head snapped up again.

"You bastard!"

He started kicking out at Dorfo and Stefan but his captors forced him to his knees, delivering their own kicks as they did so. The commotion amongst the migrants became stronger. Lutsevich grabbed Stefan's gun and fired it into the air.

"Silence, all of you, or we shoot you all!"

Deep in the crowd of migrant workers, where anger had been growing at the treatment of the three new captives, Sergei and Piotr had been obliged to forcibly restrain Jim who was on the brink of breaking his way out of the huddle to go to Blair's defence.

"No, Jim," Sergei kept whispering urgently. "No, Jim, you cannot help him just now. You know this!"

Jim had struggled against them, but in reality he knew that logic dictated this was not the time to make his move. He stared, agonised, at the battered figure being held upright by Lutsevich's goons. His brain was calculating furiously. His whole being cried out for action, but he was unsure what he could do without exposing his friends to mass slaughter by Lutsevich's jumpy and trigger-happy guards.

Lutsevich's single gunshot, however, gave him his chance. In the momentary shocked silence that followed it, Xui Li sank her teeth into her captor's arm, and the man yelled and dropped her. That was the diversion Jim needed. He broke free of Sergei and Piotr.

"I'm going to get the girls!" he shouted. "Block the guards!"

He leapt out of the crowd of men onto the guard who had held Xui Li, taking him out easily with a vicious punch to the face and throwing the girl back towards Sergei and his friends. The other goons were slow to react, looking confusedly to Lutsevich for an order. Jim had already powered into the next guards, who were holding Irene. Though armed, they were no match for his violence - controlled, but so very deadly. A high kick disarmed one – he followed it up with a slice of his hand to the man's windpipe. His companion was felled by a

heavy blow across the back of his neck. Both men dropped like stones. Jim grabbed Irene, and hurled himself back towards Sergei, to be absorbed by the milling group of migrant workers.

It was the work of moments. The other guards were far too preoccupied trying to keep the group of workers under control to be able to come to their colleagues' aid. Sergei and Piotr had been stage-managing, but all in the immigrant group were clearly ready to risk their lives causing havoc to distract Lutsevich's men.

Jim was worried. He could only guess that the men were more valuable to Lutsevich alive than dead, and the man had business commitments to meet, otherwise the guns would already have been turned on the workers themselves. But it was surely a matter of time before the guards started firing into the crowd. He grabbed Xui Li and pulled her to the back of the group with Irene.

"You've got to run, Xui Li! Detectives Henri and Rafe are outside. Find them and tell them to get you to Captain Banks. Tell him this." And he pressed his mouth to her ear so she could hear clearly in the chaos around her. Jim pulled back.

"You got it?"

She nodded, a frightened face gazing up at him.

"Go! Go!"

The men surged forward again. Weight of numbers meant they were close to overwhelming the guards, and the other men knew it, looking nervously for instructions. Out of their sight, the two women were manhandled through the small door where Irene had first entered, but Lutsevich from his vantage point on the walkway saw them go.

"Get after them!" he yelled.

Three of his men made for the door, their guns out. Lutsevich turned again to Blair.

"Tell them to stop!" he screamed, pointing at the workers. "Tell them to stop, or I kill you and all of them!"

Blair lifted his head, still dazed and far from comprehending. Lutsevich brought his handgun across Blair's head in exasperation, gashing his scalp; blood started to flow across his forehead. Lutsevich, though, had already turned to the crowd, firing his gun several times in the air, then down on the concrete floor, just in front of Sergei. The men immediately stilled, watching tensely.

"You don't stay quiet," shouted Lutsevich, "and I shoot as many of you as I like. Your owners don't pay me enough to put up with this. Any more trouble from you, and my men start shooting!"



The whole storage area was suddenly silent, with a sea of faces now upturned, watching the small tableau of Blair, Lutsevich and his two henchmen.

"Good," said Lutsevich. Then he walked deliberately to the side of the walkway and returned with a metal bar from the detritus lying there. He was looking at Blair, hatred clear on his face.

"Now, Blair Sandburg, or whoever you are, here is your going-away present."

He brought the bar in a heavy blow across Blair's chest. Blair cried out and sagged between Dorfo and Stefan, but they merely hauled him upright again and Lutsevich landed another blow, this time to Blair's stomach.

As the first blow fell, Jim leapt forward, a cry torn from his throat. Again, Sergei and Piotr held him back, trying to hide him from the guards, whose attention was being divided unequally between watching the men and admiring the violence being wrought by Lutsevich.

Jim was in an agony of indecision - if he broke away to help his friend, Sergei's group would be fair game to Lutsevich's guards, but how else could he help? He watched in growing horror as Blair was held firmly by his captors, his arms stretched out like he was the centrepiece of some bizarre crucifixion scene, complete with the two thieves on either side. Lutsevich walked around behind Blair and struck again, this time on Blair's back. Blair screamed, his knees crumpling. Dorfo and Stefan let him go and he fell to the ground, but Lutsevich kept circling his huddled form, bringing the bar down again and again against his back, his chest, his stomach. Blair's arms were over his head to protect his skull, but that made little difference. His face was covered in the blood which ran from his nose and head wound.

Jim could not stop himself reaching out with his senses. He saw every detail of the bloody violence being wrought on his friend. He had no difficulty in hearing Blair's faint cries - not words, just inarticulate sounds - despite the hubbub all around him. It was the worst form of torture for both Sentinel and man. He looked on, frozen with shock, as Blair kept trying to raise himself to his knees, but each time he saw Lutsevich strike him down with the iron bar.

It could not be endured. A final desperate struggle, and Jim broke free with a roar of rage and pain, throwing himself out of the crowd as Lutsevich raised his arm to make a deadly blow to Blair's head. But Sergei snagged his arm, and Piotr's fist connected with his jaw. Jim was knocked off his feet, and, as he fell, his head crashed against the side of the truck.

Piotr stood over Jim's unconscious frame, warding off interest from the guards. Sergei turned in anguish to watch Blair's fate, but Lutsevich's hand had already been stayed from delivering what could have been the final blow. There was noise outside. Gunfire; lots of it.

"Clear out!" Lutsevich ordered, throwing the iron bar away and giving Blair's body a final kick. "Get this piece of shit to the ranch! Put him in the trunk of the Jeep, I'll take him there myself." He turned to the other men.

"You get this load to the ranch. The driver is ready." He pointed to the silent and now somewhat bemused man at the back of the storage area. "The rest of you – deal with whatever the hell is happening outside!"

Sergei and Piotr exchanged worried looks as Blair's limp form was dragged across the floor of the storage area and out of a rear door. They themselves followed the orders of the guards to climb into the other truck, hauling the still-unconscious Jim Ellison with them. Moments later, they were being hurled around the inside of the truck as the vehicle took corners at speed, making good its escape through the surrounding gunfire.

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Outside, Henri and Rafe were hunkered down and confused. They had descended from their lookout on hearing the first shot, and retrieved their concealed car, only to be met with a volley of gunfire as they screeched up to the storage area. Lutsevich's men were now running all over, firing at anything that moved. Rafe had swerved the car to one side of a long pile of wooden pallets that stood in shadows some forty yards away from the storage area's doors, and they had jumped out and were now crouched behind it, taking stock of the situation.

"Blair and Jim?" asked Rafe, unnecessarily.

"Your guess is as good as mine, man," replied Henri distractedly. "Time to call for backup, yeah?"

Before Rafe could answer, a voice piped up from the other side of the pallets.

"Detective Henri! Detective Henri! There is a message from Jim!"

Brown poked his head out and recognised the small, determined face peeping out from behind the pallets opposite.

"Xui Li?"

"Xui Li?" repeated Rafe, in wonder.

"San'bur's in big trouble!" continued Xui Li from the hiding place where she had fled in panic from her pursuers. She looked anxiously behind her. "And men want to shoot me and this bitch here!"

All at once, Henri realised that Xui Li had a dishevelled woman in a kind of arm-lock, holding her motionless.

“Hold on, baby,” he crooned, “we’ll get you out of this. Be ready to jump!” He turned to Rafe.

“Come on, partner!”

They jumped back into the car, Rafe driving. He burnt the tyres making a huge circle around the pallets, slicing through the still-firing guards, while Henri held the rear door open. Glass shattered in the side windows and Rafe yelped.

“You okay, man?” shouted Henri, in concern.

“Fine, fine. Just be ready, okay?”

The car screeched up to the other end of the pallets and Rafe slammed on the brakes. Xui Li and her hostage tumbled in and Rafe gunned the motor once more; the car leapt forward. Henri kept the girls’ heads down as bullets clipped the trunk, and one passed right through the car from the rear window to windshield, shattering both. Rafe punched out the glass as he drove, powering down the quiet, night-time boulevards of the industrial area.

After a few moments, and clear that the road behind them was empty, he turned his head slightly towards Henri in the back seat.

“H, you think you can take over for a bit?”

Henri gave him a look.

“What’s up man? You tired, or something?”

“No, I think I’m gonna faint.”

## Chapter 19

Bellwood opened his own office door at 7 am to find Simon Banks sitting at the desk – his desk! – talking rapidly to someone on his cellphone.

“Captain Banks, what the hell...?” he began, but Banks merely put up a hand to interrupt him and kept talking. Finally he wound up the call.

“Okay, thanks, Marshall. Keep your boys on the lookout, and I’ll check back with you later anyway.”

He closed the phone and looked up.

“Captain Bellwood...”

"Captain Banks, what the hell is this?" shouted Bellwood, not to be done out of his protest. "You aren't even authorised to be this building, but you take over my office...!"

"My office, Charles. Now listen up. Thanks for coming in early..."

"As if I had a choice," snapped Bellwood. Simon drove on.

"We have a serious situation. The suspects in the illegal immigrant trafficking who got released two days ago; they've abducted two of my men – our men – and I am greatly concerned for their safety. We think they've been taken out of State, certainly out of Cascade, but we have no trail. The guys were wearing tracking devices but they've either been disabled or haven't worked. I've got Highway Patrol and the US Marshals on the lookout for the transport used, but so far no luck."

"Who are the two men?" asked Bellwood, his curiosity piqued despite his rancour.

"Ellison and Sandburg."

From the expression on Banks' face, Bellwood knew better than to make a crack right now. But he persisted.

"And how did that happen?"

"From what I've learned so far, I'm pretty sure part of the suspects' operation is responsible for the many missing persons reported by immigrant families. Blair and Jim infiltrated that group, and last night they were planning to follow the shipment to wherever the men got taken. But Blair's cover was blown. Dmitriy Lutsevich and his men cleared out with that night's shipment, Blair and Jim with him, and there was a shoot-out with Brown and Rafe, who were the back-up. Rafe's been injured, though thankfully not seriously. Bottom line is, the trackers we used stopped working. Maybe they've both been found. Whatever, we've lost the trail. It may be that Lutsevich didn't realise that Jim was a cop, but according to our witnesses, he made it pretty plain that Sandburg was going to end up dead."

"Witnesses?" queried Bellwood.

"We have two," replied Simon flatly. "Xui Li Lin, a contract worker with the PD. Her brother is one of the missing. She was ... ah ... there as well, and heard part of the conversation, which is our biggest breakthrough so far. Then there is Irene Ng, a local businesswoman who is up to her neck in fraud and is also working for Lutsevich. She's instrumental in ensuring the flow of immigrant labour – pretty much slave labour - run by the gangmasters. Rafe and Brown are processing them now, and then I want a further chat with them. You need to be here too."

Bellwood had been listening to Simon's account with increasing incredulity and offence.

"You've been doing all this unauthorised? My people have been carrying out these activities without my knowledge? You're going to pay for this!"

"No," said Banks simply. "You'll be doing the paying, Charles. You've done your best to keep my people demoralised and cowed. They've not been able to do their jobs. You've kowtowed to every whim of the politicians, you've turned a blind eye to crime, and you've supported bad policing. Why you've done this, I can't speculate, but it's clear to me that there is a web of corruption throughout the PD right now and you've fallen right into it. How it's organised, I don't quite know yet, but it's clearly high-up. I've got my own information now on paybacks and bribes as well as straightforward bloody-minded pressure on good cops. The PD is being run to someone's agenda, not the people it's meant to serve. And you are right in the middle of it!"

"Now just a minute!"

"Oh, wise up, Charles! You think when all this comes to light no one will notice your part in it? This whole edifice of lies is going to come crashing down and you'll be underneath the rubble!"

Bellwood went white and then visibly crumpled. He sat down wearily at the table.

"I never took a penny. I've heard those rumours, I've heard of people on the take. I don't know who's responsible, but I can tell you, not Commissioner Wade! Wade can't be involved in that way! He just made it clear to me that it would be better all round if I ran a tight ship, made sure I kept in touch with his office and did what he wanted. That way I was left alone. He's the Commissioner, for God's sake! How could I have gone against him? He would have had me out of here in a heartbeat, and, you know..." - he rallied briefly, searching around for extenuating circumstances - "...you know, any replacement could have been much worse than me!"

He tried to stare down Simon defiantly, but was rattled to see Simon looking at him with a mixture of contempt and pity.

"So you couldn't stand up for yourself and your people, Charles? Well, I don't even want to begin to tell you how that makes me feel. Because that would take far too long and we don't have time right now. What I'll do is give you a chance to redeem yourself by helping now. I'm starting an all-out search and rescue, as many State Units as I can muster. Because, you'd better believe, when we get to the people who've taken Jim and Blair, we'll find out who's been running the PD."

Bellwood looked sceptical.

"How can you know that?"

"Because this whole thing started when Blair and Jim got too interested in an abduction case. And the people behind that abduction have done their best to get them out of the way, first by destroying their careers, and now... well, God knows what they're facing right now. So we need to get them out of it, and you need to help!"

Bellwood opened his mouth to answer when there was an audible disturbance in the bullpen and the door burst open again. Rafe and Brown appeared, bringing a determined-looking Xui Li and a dishevelled Irene Ng. Rafe looked a little pale, his arm in a sling, and Henri kept shooting him concerned glances when he thought his partner wasn't looking.

\*

They didn't bother to move to an Interrogation Room; there was no point. Xui Li sat on the window ledge, drinking soda and looking daggers at Irene, who sat at the table, her arms crossed, trying to stare defiantly at the four cops facing her. She was in a fairly ruffled state, both mentally and physically, as Xui Li had wasted few opportunities to make her feelings known to the woman who had helped organise the disappearance of her brother. If she had had information to give, she would have been in the perfect state to deliver it all to the waiting detectives, but despite the barrage of questions, the detailed explanation given to her of her dire position in the eyes of law, and their steadfast refusal to provide a lawyer (but we didn't arrest you, Irene. You're free to go. Just ask Xui Li if you can go...) she had very little to impart.

"I swear to you. I had my own role in this and stuck to it. And Lutsevich, he didn't volunteer information."

Simon fixed her with his patent dangerous glare.

"I'm sure I don't need to repeat what Detectives Rafe and Brown have told you, Miss Ng. You are in a very serious position. Your role in this criminal activity is enough to put you away for many years."

Irene gave him a hopeless look.

"It doesn't matter how much you threaten me, I can't tell you any more."

Brown made an impatient move towards the table but Simon raised his hand to stall him.

"Miss Ng, our friends are in danger. Many young men are missing and may be dead already. Do yourself a favour. Tell us everything."

"I swear to you, I only know that there is a regular shipment to the east of the State – over the mountains. The people in that shipment, they are scratched from the records. We don't claim for them at the school. I don't know what happens to them after that".

At this, Xui Li leapt into the group at the table, leaning menacingly over Irene, who visibly flinched back in her seat.

“That's where my brother went! Maybe I take you there, see how you get on!”

When Rafe gently disengaged her from the table she was audibly hissing. Simon put his hands on her shoulders and dragged her attention away from Irene and back to him.

“Okay, Xui Li, maybe she really doesn't know anything else, which makes what Jim told you even more important. Can you repeat it for me again? Every single word you can remember.”

Xui Li nodded vigorously.

“The man – the Beard Man – he said ‘ranch’. I didn't hear, but Jim told me to tell you. He could hear what the Beard Man said to the other guys. He said...” – she frowned in concentration, and spoke the words slowly and carefully – “... he said: ‘This one we take to the ranch. Our client will want to deal with him personally. And permanently.’ Jim said this was very important!”

She looked hopefully at Simon, pleased that she had been able to deliver the message correctly. Simon patted her arm, and tried to smile.

“Xui Li, that is so important, believe me. But we need to know where the ranch is, too.”

Xui Li's expression fell. Simon turned to look at Bellwood.

“Ring any bells?”

Bellwood slowly shook his head, obviously thinking.

“Well,” continued Simon, frowning, “short of raiding every ranch east of the mountains...”

Once again the door burst open, and this time it was Megan who strode into the room, which by now was getting rather overcrowded.

“What d'you want?” snapped Henri. “We're busy.”

Megan looked suspiciously at the huddle around the table.

“Anything I can help with?” she asked pointedly.

“Thanks,” said Rafe quickly, “but we don't need your help, Connor.”

Simon raised his hands heavenward.

“Hold on, hold on! What's happening here? Megan, we'll be glad of your help.”

"Captain, she's in collusion with Bellwood!" Henri squared up to Megan, who looked from him to Rafe, startled.

"In collusion with Bellwood? Am I?"

Bellwood looked similarly astonished.

"Is she? Are you? Hold on, what you mean, 'in collusion'?"

"I was checking up on Bellwood, you morons!"

"Were you?" chorused Rafe and Brown.

"Checking up on me?" squeaked Bellwood, whom everyone was ignoring.

"Well, of course I was!" yelled Megan. "The closer I got, the more I could find out what was going on! First you, Simon, then Sandy, then Jim. This whole thing smelled rotten. Then you guys were off behaving suspiciously. You didn't want to share, and did your best to keep me in the dark! I didn't know who I could trust anymore, so I've been doing my own digging!"

"And what have you got, Megan?" asked Simon impatiently, "because right now I'd settle for either the location of Blair and Jim, or some hard evidence as to who's pulling the strings within the PD. Both would be a bonus."

Megan's eyes lit up.

"I can help with one of those at least, sir! Give me half an hour!"

\*

It was a breakfast meeting, called urgently, but that was fine as the wine bar did excellent coffee in the mornings, and there were usually pastries to go along. Lance Prentiss sipped his macchiato and looked across to his companion, who was frowning at him.

"I don't think you're taking this seriously," said the other man. "This is an unexpected development. I'm rather concerned about my asset."

"I think you have to accept, Bob, that in any operation of this sort, there's bound to be collateral damage. Everyone went into this with their eyes open. So our witness may be ... ah ... passive, rather than active? His remains will still be useable as evidence in your case in the long run. We'll just have to wait a little longer and maybe look for another way into the whole operation. Patience, my friend. This thing was years in the building; it won't all dissolve in a puff of smoke. Our long-term strategy will work fine."

"Oh, I'm glad about that," said a distinctive voice.

Prentiss looked up with a surprised smile.



"Well, hello there, baby! Join us for a coffee?"

"No thanks," said Megan. "Lance Prentiss, you are under arrest for suspected involvement in the abduction of police officers. Come with us, please." She indicated couple of uniforms behind her, who latched onto Prentiss before he could even voice a protest.

"You can't do this!" yelled the other man, leaping to his feet. "Mr Prentiss is providing valuable..."

Megan grabbed his arm.

"And I've seen you here far too many times before, mister. I think you need to come along as well." She handed the blustering man to the uniforms.

"Cuff them both!"

## Chapter 20

The jolting of the truck finally woke Jim, but as soon as he opened his eyes, he regretted it, and squeezed them tight again. A sharp pain lanced through his skull. He put his hand up and found a tender lump and stickiness. Hit his head – okay, didn't actually remember that.

The floor was moving. He opened his eyes again, more cautiously, and found Sergei looking at him with mild concern. He tried to recall where he was, and why. Everything felt very confused....

"How do you feel, Jim? We are sorry you were hurt, but we had to get you out."

Jim suddenly felt icy cold. His disjointed memories came together with a slam – Xui Li running for her life, Blair crumpling under Lutsevich's violence, himself being struck down by Piotr. He turned to Sergei in anguish.

"It was only to stop you," continued Sergei. "However, you fell and hit your head. That's why you wake up in this truck. There was so much gunfire outside. Lutsevich's men put us in at gunpoint. We were on the road in minutes of it happening."

"What happening? Did they...? Was Blair...?"

Sergei gripped his arm.

"They beat him very badly, Jim. You know that. But he was alive when we saw him last. They dragged him out before we were put in the truck. There was shooting all around, but then we left. We saw nothing else."

Jim took a few deep breaths to calm himself, then took the proffered hand that helped him into a sitting position.

"How do you feel?" repeated Sergei.

"I feel like I was hit by a 10-ton truck." Behind Sergei, he saw Piotr grinning ruefully, making out he had hurt his hand.

"Piotr says it was like punching a brick wall," smiled Sergei. "He's very sorry to have to hurt you, but we were worried Lutsevich would realise you also are a cop. We feared very much for your life, Jim."

Jim gave Piotr a wry look. Sergei was regarding him with concern.

"I am sorry things did not work out," he said carefully. "But I can only guess we are being taken to that secret place – the one where they took Arkady. So at least that is something, yes?"

"I only hope we're going to the same place they've taken Blair," replied Jim grimly. "I heard Lutsevich say his client would deal with him. Like the client would be the one to take it out on Blair."

"You heard this, Jim? We were not close by."

Jim hesitated.

"Yeah, I ... lip-read. Kind of. And I told Xui Li to tell my boss what I heard."

He dragged himself further up the vibrating wall of the truck and took note of his surroundings. Sergei was watching him.

"So when we reach this place...?"

"Then I find Blair. Get him away."

Piotr gave him a sad look, and Jim turned his head away to stare at the blank wall opposite.

"Jim," said Sergei gently. "What if it is not the same place as they take Blair?"

Jim looked at him bleakly.

"Then Blair is as good as dead," he replied, his voice flat and hopeless.

\*

An hour, perhaps, passed. At one point, the truck turned off the Interstate and soon it was bumping along rough ground – a service road, maybe, thought Jim. The vehicle stopped and the rear doors opened to reveal a new set of faces and guns. Carefully, they were ushered

out of that truck into another – one more suited to carrying livestock, it would seem, as its sides were constructed of wood planks which allowed some air to circulate. Once on the road - and it was clear their driver still stuck to county roads and byways – Jim found he could make out a good deal of their surroundings by watching their progress through the gaps in the slats. Not that it helped much. They were in the sprawling agricultural land east of the mountains. The landscape was a large patchwork of orchards and fruit fields, currently showing their spring growth, which subsequently transformed into large irrigated zones of root crops and legumes as they travelled further east. From the air, Jim knew, it would look distinctive – all big circles and huge rectangles of irrigated land –but it would be hard to pick out features. At ground level, the problem was just the same. Fields stretching on forever, much like their neighbours, and signs of habitation few and far between.

He watched the dawn break, not taking his eyes away from the gaps. Sergei joined him when the sky lightened, and together they watched the truck's progress. Sergei encouraged Jim to drink some of the water left for the men in the truck, but found him unresponsive and grim, hardly paying attention to his occasional questions or observations. In fact, Jim had done his best to shut himself down emotionally until all that was left was a shell of bone and flesh. Anything more would allow him to think, and he would not allow himself to wallow in the feeling of utter disaster that had threatened to completely overwhelm him earlier in the night. He could not accept that Blair was lost to him. He would not contemplate any other outcome than Blair at his side again.

Some time after sunrise, the truck took a turn off the county highway, passed through some fencing, and they were on a basic dirt track in what looked like private property – maybe a ranch or farm. Here, much of the ground seemed more arid, though craning ahead Jim could see the bright green of irrigated circles gleaming in the early light. Not long after this point, Sergei was jostling his shoulder urgently, forcing him to break out of his stupour.

“Look, Jim! On the other side - an aircraft! Maybe an airfield?”

Jim moved to the other side of the truck and focused on the view. A small light aircraft stood on an empty patch of ground, with a small fuel tank planted near it, and an orange wind-sock dangled limply from a pole nearby.

“Looks like it,” he replied, his voice rough after the hours of silence. “A private airstrip for this ranch, maybe?”

The truck bumped along for another twenty minutes or so, travelling fairly slowly, and then drew to a halt. All the men got up from where they had been lounging listlessly on the floor, and huddled together. Now their destination appeared to have been reached, all their anxiety resurfaced. The air was tense. Jim didn't blame them at all. He himself felt an extremely human response of fear at the feeling of being powerless, of being incapable of

doing anything to influence his own fate – a fate which it was all too easy to imagine would be nothing but despairing loss.

Finally there was a clanking as the rear doors were unlocked, and, again at gunpoint, the occupants of the truck were ushered down and towards a low, timber-built building with security lights fixed to the roof and bars on the windows. Jim's face was grim as he reflected that yet again a rough barracks block was to serve as these men's shelter – and they thought they were in the land of the free, he thought bitterly.

Jim found himself well-protected still by Sergei and his friends. They formed a phalanx around him as they were unloaded from the truck, Sergei still concerned about Jim's identity being discovered. Jim appreciated the gesture, though he was pretty sure that discovery was only a matter of time. But he kept his head down, nonetheless, and found they were quickly housed within the wooden building, the door barred on them and then bolted.

"There's water," barked one of their captors. "Food's over there, if these greedy bastards haven't eaten it already."

And in the dimness at the rear of the building, Jim saw another fifteen or so men huddled, all of them dirty, ill-kempt, and many with clear injuries.

As the guards outside withdrew, so the men moved forward, each group regarding the other warily. Jim started putting the pieces together. Were these the missing men? Did they all end up here? And if so, what the hell for?

Suddenly there was a yelp from the other group and a skinny young boy lurched forward.

"Sergei! Sergei!"

Arkady; Sergei leapt for him with a cry, and enveloped the boy in his arms. Jim's throat tightened at the pure emotion, the pure love. He knew what that felt like. He missed Blair with a keenness that twisted in his gut like a knife.

Piotr moved forward, joining in the hug. Then others amongst Jim's new friends called out tentatively, and more figures came forward. It was heart-breaking – all this bitter joy at reunion when all that had really happened was that the rescuers had joined the ranks of the captives. He watched, feeling numb. A small group of men seemed to be standing apart from the others; Asian boys. They walked forward tentatively as if unsure of interrupting, but anxious to see who might have come for them. Jim scanned them and found who he was looking for; a slim young man with an unruly lock of hair over his forehead. The youth watched the other men greet each other with clear longing.

Jim walked up to him, and put a hand on his shoulder. The young man jumped, startled, and stared at him with wide eyes.

"Hello, Wei Long," said Jim. "Your sister sent me."

## Chapter 21

"What the hell?" Simon was momentarily thrown. "Zuckerman?"

Zuckerman brushed off his suit jacket ostentatiously and glared at the departing uniformed officers. He turned to Simon.

"I am a Federal Officer! The Bureau will not tolerate this kind of behaviour! What is your officer..." - he pointed Megan - "...playing at? You know damn well I'm running a complex undercover operation!"

Megan looked open-mouthed at Simon and then turned to Henri and Rafe, who looked equally stunned.

"You know this bloke, Simon?" she asked. "I've been keeping tabs on Prentiss these last weeks, logging who he's been meeting with. If it's not Wade, or key personnel in the PD when he's relaying Wade's instructions, then he'll be meeting this guy. Always in the same place. And you're saying he's FBI?" She gaped at Zuckerman.

"Oh, he's FBI, but there's a little piece of information you were trying to keep to yourself, wasn't there, Bob?" replied Simon, with a dangerous note to his voice.

Zuckerman flicked his glance away from Simon's direct glare.

"Yes," continued Simon, turning to his detectives, "he omitted to tell Blair and Jim that he's been working solo. He made a nuisance of himself obsessing about this case for months until the Bureau told him to lighten up - they didn't agree with him. I know this because the regional A.D, Rick Martin, whom I've met a few times - he's a reasonable guy - finally got back to me last night. He's pretty annoyed Zuckerman has been off on his own, with an unauthorised and consequently unsupported operation. No wonder then that when things went wrong, Blair hadn't the backup he needed."

"Blair?" blurted Bellwood. "Blair Sandburg is working for the FBI?"

Zuckerman addressed Bellwood direct.

"Yes, Captain. The treatment of Mr Sandburg by this Police Department made him an ideal asset for infiltrating the criminal group that is receiving a good deal of assistance from persons within the PD - at the behest, it would seem, of Commissioner Wade. He went along willingly. However, something happened last night. I've not been able to contact him subsequently, and now, I confess, I am somewhat concerned for his safety."

Megan, Rafe and Brown gave a collective snort of displeasure.

"As well you might," said Simon thinly. "You deserve a good deal of credit for pushing this case, Zuckerman. You're tenacious and have a strong sense of duty, I'll give you that. What you don't have is the wits to see how dangerous running this undercover op on your own

has been for the people who've been involved in it, either knowingly or unwittingly. You've just been single-minded about vindicating your own belief, and that's put our friends in extreme danger."

"And what about Loverboy here?" asked Rafe, anger his voice.

Prentiss, who had been listening to the exchange with a guarded expression, spoke up.

"Oh, I'm just Wade's assistant. I relay his instructions to the Police Department and monitor how the PD's policies are playing out. Agent Zuckerman just asked me to keep an eye on what's been happening."

"Bullshit!" snapped Megan. I've seen you in the PD putting pressure on departmental heads, getting cases shelved and suspects released. You're up to your neck in this."

Prentiss looked worriedly at Zuckerman.

"Mr Prentiss approached me with information about what was going on, having heard via Wade's various connections that the Bureau had been showing interest," said Zuckerman. "He has been providing me with information that will be key in nailing Wade and stopping what's happening in the PD."

"If it was so clear what he's doing," snapped Rafe, "then what the hell are you waiting for? Arrest the bastard!"

Zuckerman shook his head sadly.

"It doesn't work like that, Detective. Wade has a good deal of power and a lot of influential friends in high places who are very ready to support him – a veritable backscratching fraternity. I suspect that the Bureau backing away in the first instance is an example of his influence. Moreover, Wade deals only in verbal instructions. There's never anything written down. Any case would be your word against his, and that's where his wealth and position would come into play."

"Ah, yes, but there's something else, isn't there, Bob?" Simon was carefully eyeing the FBI agent. He was a past master at reading suspects' expressions and there was something the man was still withholding.

Zuckerman looked at him squarely.

"Yes, Captain Banks. And that is why Mr Prentiss is key to this operation."

All eyes turned Prentiss, who looked smug.

"Wade's not the main man," said the man who worked for Wade. "There's someone bigger behind him. Someone who's put a great deal of money into Wade's political career, to get Wade into the right position. Now he's there, this guy is raking in the profits. Drugs labs,

smuggling, people-trafficking, financial fraud – you name it. He's been quietly active for a good while, outside of Cascade, but Wade's powerbase now means he's been able to up his game."

"This isn't Friday Night Mystery, Prentiss," snarled Simon impatiently. "Spit it out!"

Prentiss shrugged.

"Wade has a half-brother – different father. The guy's name is Richard Sterling. Came up in the construction industry, diversified – in more ways than one, has a lot of property and a lot of interests. He got in touch with Wade years ago, realised the potential. Wade's a fixer, but not an original thinker. Now he doesn't need to be. Big brother has all the imagination and Wade gets a big cut. He set Wade up as his middleman, and Wade jumps when called, gets things done that he's asked. My guess is your guys have been taken to one of Sterling's properties. But which one, I don't know. In the long run it doesn't matter. This operation was an approach we thought would be good to try, but it didn't work. The guy's cover was blown, so he's useless now. We'll have to look for another way in."

Everyone on the room suddenly went silent, as Prentiss's cold-blooded dismissal of Blair's life sank in. It took a moment for Prentiss to realise the enormity of what he had given away. The expressions on their faces made him blanch.

"You knew all this," said Rafe quietly. "Both of you knew all this, but you kept it to yourselves? You let other people go in and do the dirty work for you? You let a man walk in to his death?"

"You're out of touch, man." Prentiss recovered his composure quickly. "Whistleblowing is a hard profession. You ever see the whistleblower whose career took off after they did the decent thing? No, they never recover. They're always tarred with it and people don't trust them, even though they're supposed to be the good guys. I had no intention of that happening to me. What kind of dumb cops are you?"

Simon slammed his hand on the table, shaking Prentiss out of his complacency.

"The kind that's gonna charge you with being accessory after the fact in abduction and extortion, not to mention corruption in a public office. Just like Captain Bellwood here, you're in it up to your neck!"

"Captain," broke in Henri. "We're wasting our time with this sleazebag. If it's okay with you, I'm going to check the wavelengths again – see if there's a chance the trackers have popped up."

Prentiss chuckled.

"PD trackers? You actually used PD equipment? What a joke! There was a general instruction to Wade's people in the PD to ensure you guys got no cooperation. Those trackers won't have a chance in hell of working properly."

"You knew all this was going down?" asked Megan, incredulous at the man's lack of concern. "You knew men were being sent into an operation with faulty equipment? You had a chance to help them and you did nothing? You're a real piece of work!"

Prentiss leered at her.

"Such an ugly accent, baby. You should keep your mouth shut."

Brown suddenly lurched forward and grabbed Prentiss by the lapels, dragging the man to his feet.

"You don't talk to my friend like that. You don't put my friends in danger. You sanctimonious, self-interested, supercilious son-of-a-bitch!"

Rafe looked at him in surprise; those weren't the sort of words he normally expected from Henri.

The tension in the room had reached boiling point. Henri was on the brink of landing a punch on Prentiss when Simon's arm shot out and restrained him.

"Let him go, Detective. You can't assault this man."

Brown dropped Prentiss and looked at Simon in surprise and fury. Prentiss dusted himself off.

"Exactly right," he began, when there was a blur of motion, a solid thump, and Prentiss was suddenly sitting dazed on the floor.

"Not," said Simon, straightening his glasses, "when your Captain is there to do it first."

"This is unacceptable!" bleated Zuckerman. "You are maltreating a federal witness..."

He trailed off as all eyes turned to him.

"And you!" yelled Henri, really enraged by now. "You let my friend walk into this when you knew how everything was stacked against him! Just so you could get your collar!"

Again, Henri was restrained.

"Dammit, Cap! Let me hit him!"

"You do, and it will be serious trouble, Brown. He's no ordinary perp."



"Quite right, Captain," sniffed Zuckerman, rising to his feet and looking rattled. "Striking an FBI officer is a federal offence. Your police career would be over!"

And suddenly there was a second soggy thwack and Zuckerman stumbled back across the room to fall against the desk. All eyes turned to Megan, who was glaring at Zuckerman and rubbing her fist.

"Federal offences don't count with me, Agent Zuckerman. I'm Australian."

\*

It was into this tableau of high dudgeon and simmering rage that Joel walked, his arms full of papers.

"What the heck...?" he began, looking at Simon.

"Long story, Joel," said Simon, making a face, "and where the hell have you been, anyway?"

"I went back to your place to get Sandburg's papers. You know, all the research he'd been doing on Wade, in case there was a clue. But I guess I'm not up to speed on what we know."

"Best we've got," said Simon with a deep sigh, "is that they're headed for a ranch somewhere. Maybe to the east of the mountains."

"A ranch?" queried Prentiss. "You struck out, guys. Sterling has cannabis farms on the coast, but not a ranch. Neither does Wade - he hates the big outdoors."

Brown turned on him angrily.

"You want some more, Loverboy?"

"Hang on," said Joel, dropping his papers hurriedly on the table. "That rings a bell."

Simon huddled over the papers with him.

"Joel, this may be our only hope..."

But Joel wasn't listening. He was madly shuffling a pile of microfiche photocopies.

"Yes! Here it is! Wade himself doesn't own a ranch, but a subsidiary of Etruscan Holdings has a 40% holding in Eton Farm Machinery, and that has a subsidiary called Eton Farms. Which has only one asset - Wilderness Ranch."

Simon whooped, and slapped Joel on the back.

"Megan, get these two gentlemen some separate, secure accommodation. We'll get back to them later. Rafe, Brown - get maps and start coordinating with the US Marshals. We need to move fast, but God knows we need to be careful."



"Captain Banks."

It was Bellwood's voice from the back of the room. Everyone had forgotten he was there. Bellwood stepped up to Simon.

"Let me work with you and Captain Taggart to get the road and air transport, as well as ground support. You'll need my authorisation."

Simon regarded the man carefully. There was no guile, just an aura of abject misery, and a desperate need to put things right.

"Charles," he said, "let's get to work."

## Chapter 22

Pain woke Blair. Sick, heavy, nauseating; he opened his eyes and found his vision distorted, the dim light in the room difficult to bear. His whole body felt like one giant bruise; his head was throbbing and his mouth and tongue were as dry as dust. He tried moving and almost cried out with the sudden, sharp agony. He gritted his teeth and tried again. Now he knew what to expect, he found he could bear it slightly better. He shifted gradually and turned onto his side, fighting waves of nausea. There were bright lights and dark patches in his vision. He wanted a drink; needed a drink.

"Water," he said. It didn't sound much like a word, but there was movement at the edge of his battered field of vision and a hand thrust a tin cup of water at him. The light flared in his eyes and he squinted, but couldn't see who was with him. He took the water, fumbling a little to bring it to his mouth, and drank greedily. With water dribbling all down his chin, he put the cup down again.

"Who's there?" he rasped.

Someone took the cup away. Blair laid his head down on the cot and consciousness faded out again.

Some time later – no idea how much later – he woke again. The room was brighter – daylight, maybe? He moved gingerly, recalling the pain of earlier, and tried to gauge his injuries. Arms and legs seemed to be entire; head still there, though his skull felt tender. Sight seemed a bit better. The sickness was still with him and now there was a gnawing pain spreading from his back into his belly and loins.

"Hey!" He tried a feeble shout. "I need to pee."

The door opened and a figure appeared, pointed to a large can in the corner of the room, and left again. Blair sighed and swung his legs gently off the cot. The pain in his back seemed to ease slightly, or maybe he was just getting used to it. He stood, swaying as his head cleared, and made his way carefully towards the can.

Yes, this hurts, too. Everything hurts. Dear sweet Christ, can this be over soon?

He reached the can and unzipped. He could see the bruises all round his stomach and ribs, and so probably on his back as well – his kidneys? Oh yeah, peeing was excruciating, and his urine was bloody. To be expected after the beating he knew he had received, but there was hardly consolation in confirming it. He zipped again clumsily and leant his head against the wall.

He had never felt so bad. This was worse than being drowned... The thought brought a quick spurt of hysterical laughter, and snot from his nose. That was bloody, too. He assumed – indeed hoped – that was mostly from his superficial injuries, rather than any further internal damage. But hey, who knew? The day could no doubt get even more interesting yet.

"Sandburg."

The voice broke through his hazy consciousness. Not a question, just a statement of his name. He turned to see a well-built man, casually dressed in faded jeans and a well-laundered shirt. His face was tanned and his hair and neat beard a silver grey. He was regarding Blair curiously, apparently without rancour or malevolence.

"Who are you?" Blair pulled himself upright, convincing himself he was feeling better with every passing moment.

"So, you're Sandburg," mused the man, with a half-smile. "I never really knew what you looked like. Never imagined you'd end up here."

"Where's here?"

The man ignored him. He stepped further into the room and leant against the wall.

"You've caused me a great deal of trouble, you know," he remarked pleasantly. "You and your detective friend. Still, that's all over now, isn't it?" Blair felt himself grow cold. Did they know about Jim, too?

"You wanna tell me who you are, man? Because gloating works better when the gloatee knows what's being gloated about."

The man smiled in amusement.

"Why, of course. My name is Richard Sterling. You and your friend kept nibbling away at business of mine until I got rid of you. Or so I thought. Turns out you're hard to remove. I never expected you to get as far as working for Dmitriy Lutsevich, though. Well done. Dmitriy didn't know who he'd caught until he got here and told me the name. I'm surprised your friend Ellison wasn't with you. I thought you two were joined at the hip..."

Blair looked stonily at Sterling.

"Detective Ellison was my back-up. You wouldn't have even seen him, but he knows where I am now. You've got Cascade PD breathing down your neck, man."

"Oh," said Sterling, with mock surprise, "I guess you're talking about that tracker you had on you? Dmitriy checked you over before he got here. He found it, of course, and destroyed it, just in case. Though I doubt it would have helped you much. Of course, you wouldn't know about that."

He smiled pleasantly again at Blair.

"All in all, you led Dmitriy quite a dance, I think," mused Sterling. "He's not at all pleased you got inside his operation so easily, but as I said to him, that's his failure and I expect him to make changes. We certainly can't have that kind of thing happening again. I suppose he felt a little aggrieved. I gather he was the one who did that to you..." he continued, gesturing at Blair's torso. "That was thoughtless of him, because I would've preferred you to be somewhat fitter for tonight. Spoils the fun otherwise."

"So, go on, tell me. What happens tonight?"

Sterling smiled blandly.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough. You see..." he continued, "... you stumbled upon a large and important commercial setup of mine, Mr Sandburg. Not only that, you endangered all

the networks of influence that I've built up over the years as a businessman in Cascade. If you had succeeded, it would have resulted in serious loss to me. I really can't have that."

Blair regarded him narrowly.

"People trafficking business this, is it, Mr Sterling?"

"Now you mention it, yes."

"Oh, let's mention it. By all means, let's mention it. Let's also mention the forced labour, extortion, and modern-day slavery that goes with it. About the foulest, filthiest, most inhuman kind of trade anyone could possibly carry on," hissed Blair, his voice contemptuous.

"Quite the bleeding-heart liberal, aren't you? Not that it matters any more. After tonight, you will no longer have an interest in my affairs, and I can assure you, Cascade PD will no longer have any interest in you."

Blair frowned, trying hard to get his brain to work properly.

"The PD? You and the PD?"

Sterling wasn't listening.

"You see, some friends and I like to hunt. They're businessmen, like me, mostly from over the State line, looking for a bit of entertainment. God knows it's tedious enough out here in the boonies. But the game around here is pretty poor. Some deer, jackrabbits... So once a month or so, we liven things up. Tonight, you'll be the star attraction. And I can assure you..." He leaned towards Blair, his voice cold and hard "... that what will be left of you won't even interest the coyotes, let alone Cascade's forensic teams, should they even get this far."

Blair hardly heard the threat. The cogs in his brain were rapidly clicking.

"You hunt...? You hunt people? People? You sadistic bastard! Is that what happened to the missing men? Is this where the extra transports come? Bringing game for you?" Blair was wide-eyed with outrage at the horror and enormity of it all.

Sterling smiled again, without humour.

"They're illegals, Sandburg. They don't count. And out here, you don't count any more, either. So, you see, I'm quite at liberty to gloat."

It suddenly hit Blair like a thunderclap - like a row of cherries came up in the slot machine. Everything fitted into place.

"You and the PD! You're the one with enough influence over Wade to pull us off the case, to stop Jim from being a cop, to systematically remove all decent cops from the PD, or leave

them powerless, which is much the same! You..." He paused, quite breathless with the realisation, "... you're the guy at the top!"

Sterling shrugged.

"Penny's dropped, huh? Much good it'll do you. I'll see you later, Sandburg. Try to build up your strength in the meantime – you'll need it."

\*

Soon after the limited breakfast, reunited family members still sticking to each other like glue, the guards appeared again and, without much prompting, the men in the barracks filed out to waiting vans. Jim found himself similarly ushered out. He looked at Arkady for clarification.

"We being taken off to work now?"

"Farming," the boy said simply. "Like I told you. Potato fields, maize fields, beans, hops. We work on all of it."

"Where's the machinery?" asked Jim, alert to anything that could possibly be used to his advantage, and vaguely aware of farming practices in the east of the State; mostly mechanised, and highly intensive.

"Not many machines. Sterling wants to keep more people on the farm. You know why," Arkady said pointedly.

Jim nodded grimly, thinking back to what he and Sergei had discovered in their rapid questioning of friends and relatives held in the barracks. He learned that the men were normally put to agricultural work or construction, elsewhere on the farm. From what the men told him of the building work, Jim guessed the structures might well be planned as marijuana farms – from the air, any DEA aircraft would find them difficult to distinguish from other farming activities, and in that quiet locality, surrounded by the generally intensive agriculture, it was the perfect place to hide in plain sight.

So far, so ordinary. What else he heard had chilled his blood. The group received new recruits regularly, via the truckloads like the one bringing Jim. Once there, men would regularly be selected and dragged out at night, usually once a month. If they came back at all, they would be injured – bloody and battered - and telling in horror of a perverted hunt, where they ran from horses in the moonlight, and tried to escape their crushing hooves and the whips and clubs of the men riding them. They had no idea how many men had vanished in this way. Wei Long had run for his life one night, and had come off lightly with only cuts and bruises by the time he had been rounded up by Sterling's men in the growing dawn. But his cousin Feng, who had been with him, he had never seen again.

The tale had sickened Jim when he had first heard it. Now, recollecting the accounts, he turned away to hide his expression and scanned the farmland around him, trying to sense where men had met their deaths at the hands of sadists.

"You cannot see," said Arkady, interpreting his glance. "They take us far out, into the scrubland." And Jim threw out his sight, only to find a dry, dusty hinterland edged with low hills. There was no detail to detect from where he stood.

"And some men," continued Arkady, "they go to build houses. Greenhouses. Make foundations."

Jim nodded. Increasingly this sounded like a perfect drug farming set-up, but even more, it seemed this man Sterling had created himself a perfect, and perverted, empire out of the honest, simple farmland in Washington State, complete with an enslaved workforce to satisfy his every whim. Once again, his mind flashed to Blair, never far from his thoughts in any case. How his friend had been so incensed, so enraged, by the thought of this slavery taking place right under their noses of ordinary American citizens, and no one doing a damn thing about it. Now he understood why Blair was so determined to break this case; understood both rationally and emotionally. The man Sterling was at the heart of the problems at the PD, and the disruption of their own lives and careers. But he was also the embodiment of everything Blair found repellent. This was a personal crusade in every sense, but Jim was right on board with all of that.

As he was loaded into the minivan with the others he scanned to the north to focus on the low-lying ranch-style farmhouse and its associated buildings; attractive, expensive-looking, and pretty sophisticated, judging by the satellite dishes attached to the low roof. He concentrated as hard as he could on the black smudges that were the windows. Somewhere there, please God, Blair Sandburg was waiting for him. If only he could see that little bit further...

Sergei was shaking his arm.

"Jim! Wake up, Jim! We have to move!"

The minivan had stopped miles away from the barracks, in amongst the huge green circles of irrigated potato fields. Against a natural rise in the ground, where the fields stopped, there were signs of construction. They all jumped out and he joined a gang mixing cement, giving the distant farmhouse – now no more than a dot on the horizon – a final glance.

Hang on, buddy. Please, just hang on.

## Chapter 23

Simon pulled a cigar from his breast pocket and chomped hard on the end. He looked up from the papers spread out on the table and caught Joel's disapproving look, so he stowed it again and turned once more to the US Marshall who was pointing out places on the map with a pudgy forefinger.

"So this Richard Sterling really has a farm just there?" he asked.

The spot was somewhat to the east of Ritzville, the town where Simon, Joel and Henri were gathered in the Adams County Sheriff's office. Simon had driven there in well under three hours from Cascade, a white-knuckle ride even by Henri's standards.

"Yep," said Sheriff Hawkes, who had shown remarkable fortitude at finding his town invaded by two US Marshalls' trucks from Spokane, a helicopter, and some anxious-looking detectives from way over on the coast. "On the way to Fennell Lake. You can get to it off the North Benge Road. Mainly potatoes and some green stuff. I hear he's trying to experiment with high-value glasshouse crops as well. We don't know much about him, only see his guys from time to time. Their boss flies himself in and out of the farm in his own Cessna."

"You called it a farm," queried Joel. "We've had people refer to it as a ranch. You sure it's the same place?"

The sheriff gave him a brief grin.

"Yeah, lots of places around here in the old days tried ranching. The ground is pretty arid unless you can get at the groundwater. Once irrigation technology changed, agriculture around here changed along with it. I think 'Wilderness Ranch' is just an old name from the past."

"How many men do think there are, Sheriff?" asked Marshall Snell, who had been Simon's first contact earlier that day and who had dropped everything to bring his team to Simon's aid. The US Marshalls Service were outside the police structure and so, in Simon's view, less likely to have been affected by Sterling's influence; plus, they had the benefit of specialising in tracking people down, which was just the skill-set he was after. Marshall Snell had jumped at the chance to help.

"A good few," answered Sheriff Hawkes, considering. "He keeps a good number of staff there, really unusual in this area, which is normally just small farms with few people on them. He's got the money to spend, I guess. Plus he uses a lot of immigrant labour, I hear. They say he's got some charitable thing about giving work to new arrivals. Gets them jobs on his farm."

Both Joel and Simon looked at Hawkes disbelievingly. Hawkes shrugged and spread his hands.



"Yeah, I know, sounds like straightforward cheap labour to me, too. But hey, they make no trouble, I got no cause to take a professional interest, right?"

"Numbers, Sheriff?" prompted Snell. Hawkes thought again.

"At least eight land staff, I'd say. We see enough different guys in town picking up supplies. Also a couple at the main house, maybe, as domestic staff. As to the migrant labour – no idea, sorry."

Snell looked at Simon.

"Your plan, Captain Banks?"

"I'd like to take this place down, as soon as possible," replied Simon. "There's a high probability that not only are my men there, prisoners, but it's also where our missing migrant workers are being held." He looked hard at Snell. "Time of is of the essence, Marshall. I want to move as fast as possible."

Snell nodded.

"If Sterling's setup is what we think it is, we have armed men to consider. Sheriff Hawkes' team is three, there's five of us Marshals, and your team makes eleven. Good odds, but we still need surprise on our side. With that open landscape, they'll see us for coming miles. So, we wait until dark, and use the Helo to guide us in."

Simon looked grave.

"It's a long time to wait," he muttered. Snell sighed.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I know what you're going through. But we can't rush this if you want any chance of success, and with minimal casualties on our side."

Simon nodded.

"Can we get a medical team here from Spokane before then? I'd like them in the helicopter. I'm pretty sure that at least one of my men is badly injured."

"Sure thing, Captain," answered Hawkes, picking up the phone immediately. "And you know, Marshall Snell is right. We'll be able to get the vehicles through with no lights. There's going to be a full moon tonight."

\*

Jim had made his plan over the course of the day. In the truck ride back at sunset, he had discussed it with Sergei. He would break out, that night. It was the only thing to do, and he felt the men should come with him. Sergei was unconvinced.

"Jim, you don't think these men have thought to do that? Have tried already? Arkady, you tell him!"

Arkady took Jim's arm, trying to spark interest in the stony face staring down at him.

"Jim, if men get away from here, where do they go? Miles and miles of nowhere! They don't know where they are, where to go. No car, no money, no papers. They have to stay. And we know, when men run, the guards find them, beat them. Some have even been shot. We've seen this. The same thing may happen to you!"

Jim brushed him off impatiently.

"Blair is in there somewhere, and I have to find him." He rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Look, Sergei knows already, we had backup for this. My friends at the PD were ready to come and help us. Trouble is, I was wearing a tracker and it was attached my shirt. When I woke up in the van after Piotr hit me, half of it was missing. Smashed when I fell, I guess, or faulty equipment, I don't know. And considering the damage Lutsevich did to Blair with that bar, chances are Blair's tracker went the same way..."

Sergei and Arkady exchanged hopeless glances.

"But..." continued Jim, "... my friends will be looking for us. I know that. And I also know that if Xui Li got to my friends waiting outside that storage facility, then she would have told my Captain what I heard. He'll put two and two together. And when they get here – well, the first thing Sterling's men may want to do is get rid of the evidence – all these men, here. Fighting back may be the best form of defence."

Sergei looked at Jim sadly.

"It has been hours, Jim, many hours. They do not come. Maybe the girl did not find your Captain. Maybe the message did not get through."

Jim didn't answer for a moment. Sergei took note of the clenched jaw and hard eyes; the man was determined.

"Okay," said Jim eventually. "Okay, I understand. But I'm getting out, and I'm going to the ranch house to find Blair. Will you help me get out?"

Sergei gripped Jim's arm.

"Jim, you bring me my brother again. We will not let you do this alone. Piotr and me, we come with you. We will help."

Jim looked at him, suddenly afraid for these two men. This wasn't their fight any more. Sergei had his brother back, and there was no need for him to endanger himself further. But

before he could say anything, Sergei grinned and shook his head, guessing exactly what was going through Jim's mind.

"No, Jim, you cannot deny us a chance to help destroy the men who've done so much harm to so many families. Arkady, he will make sure the men get clear if your friends arrive to rescue us all."

Jim gave a half-smile at the good-natured jibe. God knew, the whole sorry mess had been characterised by appalling timing and a complete lack of coordination by all parties involved, and from the very beginning at that. If he and Sandburg had just stopped for one moment, had just taken five minutes to brief each other on what they knew...

Oh, hey, now there was a metaphor all right. If he and Sandburg could have spent a minute in the long weeks previously to own up to each other. If Jim Ellison had swallowed his pride and reserve enough to stand in front of his friend and tell him the deepest hopes and fears and longings of his heart; had taken enough time, not snatched moments when all was falling apart...

He returned to the present.

"Point taken, Sergei. And thank you, friend, for doing this."

He turned again to Arkady.

"Like your brother says, if all hell breaks loose, and my friends arrive, get the boys out of the barracks and scattered. Tell them to lie low and keep out of sight."

Arkady nodded vigorously, his eyes wide with concern.

"Now, Jim," said Sergei, matter-of-factly. "How do we break out of this building?"

Jim grinned.

"Sergei, not only did I spend a large part of my life living in quarters like this, Sandburg and I have seen just about every World War II POW movie you can think of. All we need is ingenuity and some brute strength."

A heavy arm descended on his shoulder.

"I am here, Jim Ellison," said Uncle Piotr with a crooked grin. "I am very strong. And ingenious, too."

## Chapter 24

It was a full moon, just rising over the hills to the south-east, as Jim eased his way out between the shattered floorboards of the barracks, and onto the dirt under the building. He could have done without that. Sentinel vision was more than good enough to keep him functional in the dark of the night; now the moonlight made everything look floodlit, and gave opponents every chance of spotting them, too. He shuffled along the dirt, and heard Sergei and Piotr drop down behind him.

Once at the edge of the building, he scanned for threats. As expected, a couple of guards dozed in a Toyota pickup nearby. No one else appeared to be stationed there. He was about to slip round into the shadow of the building when he heard the radio in the Toyota crackle, and the guards snapped awake.

"Fisk, they'll be bringing the horses to you later. There's going to be a special event first. Only one guy."

The guard slurred some response, but both were clearly now awake and alert. Jim considered his options. Rush them and risk discovery? Or move straight up to the ranch house and risk being spotted? A pickup door opened.

"I need a leak before it gets too busy," muttered one of the men, sliding out of the driver's seat. Jim did not need to prompt Sergei that this might give them a chance to jump the guards; he saw a shadow slip to his left as Sergei circled to position himself near the first man, now relieving himself on the local sagebrush. As with menfolk everywhere, the man's back was turned. The second man got out of the truck and stretched his arms above his head, letting out a long yawn.

The chance was heaven-sent. Jim crouched and snatched up a flat stone from the dirt at his feet. He let his sight reach out to the yawning man, and a fraction of a second later the stone left his hand and collided with the guard's temple. The man's surprised gasp as he crumpled to the ground was matched by the muffled thud and groan as Sergei's target bit the dust.

"Excellent!" said Piotr, beaming broadly. "You have good eyes, Jim Ellison."

"Don't I just," muttered Jim.

Sergei pulled his opponent into the brush. Piotr did the same with the other, and both men were quickly secured with their own belts.

"We use the car?" asked Sergei.

"Quietly, and without lights," replied Jim. "Okay, let's be quick. We don't have much time. Once they find they've lost contact with these guys, we're all in trouble."

They coasted the car close to the ranch house, and then abandoned it, Jim taking the guards' rifle and the radio. There was light aplenty in the compound in front of the buildings. Jim crouched down, placing the semi-automatic on the ground, and threw his hearing out to assess what was behind the lighted windows.

Chatter, lots of it – male voices - the chink of glasses, laughter; and then a cultured voice asking for attention.

"...so I'd like you all to stay and enjoy your brandies for a little while longer. I just have some personal retribution to exact, and then I'll be right with you..."

The speaker emerged; a clean-cut bearded man dressed in expensive Western gear. And beside him was Dmitriy Lutsevich, nursing a glass of scotch.

"You'll get your chance," the bearded man – surely Sterling – was saying. "There's horses for both of us. The boys will be bringing them out to us in a short while. I want to drive him out a-ways in the pickup, give him a bit of a head start. Not that he'll get far, he's in too bad a shape. That's your fault."

Lutsevich grunted noncommittally.

"So I want you in the back of the pickup with Sandburg. Try not to rough him up any more, okay? He needs to be able to walk, at least. I'll drive."

Sandburg! The name Jim had been waiting for! So Blair was there, but in what condition? Was he now going to face the hunt like so many young men before him? He felt Sergei grab his arm.

"You hear this, Jim?"

Jim nodded.

"They're going to be taking him out in a pickup. Horses later."

"And you?"

Jim turned to him, and saw Sergei's concerned face in the shadows.

"I'm going to get Sandburg. You can use the gun to keep the houseguests under control until I get back." Sergei did not comment on Jim's certainty. Instead, he asked:

"How many men do you think?"

"Six guests are in the lounge. Two more men are there – they're quieter, so staff, I'd say. There are three men bringing the horses from the stables right now - I can hear them coming, and at least one in the pickup that's being driven up the track. That makes eight all told, with the two we dealt with."

"So," calculated Sergei, apparently unfazed by Jim's quick assessment of the numbers against them, "that leaves..."

Jim tensed, finally detecting a familiar presence.

"The one with Blair."

Blair emerged from the shadows at the side of the house, with his arm held tightly by another of Sterling's men, and a gun jabbed in his side. He moved stiffly, as if in pain but trying not to show it. His face looked drawn and grey, even under the yellow glow of the porch lights. There was dry blood across his forehead and down one cheek.

Jim breathed out. Still alive; there was still a chance...

The men brought Blair up to the porch steps. Jim's throat tightened as he saw his friend draw himself up straight to address Sterling.

"You're so going to get yours, Sterling. There are good people in Cascade PD. You're on borrowed time, man."

Sterling smiled pleasantly at Blair, then stepped forward and backhanded him hard across the face. Blair stumbled, and would have fallen, if not for his guard. Jim started forward in a reflex action as he saw the blow, but Sergei and Piotr held onto him tightly.

"And you, you moralising little fuck," snarled Sterling, "you don't have any time left at all."

A Ford pickup cruised into the yard. Blair put up his free arm to block out the headlights, and as he did so, his shirt rose and parted to show his stomach. Jim flinched to see the purple flare of bruising all around his friend's torso. The Ford stopped, and Lutsevich put down his glass and went down the steps, dragging Blair from his captor and up to the vehicle.

"Get in," he barked, pushing Blair roughly onto the truck-bed and climbing in himself. "Mr Sterling, all ready for you."

Sterling came down the steps and nodded to the Ford driver.

"Have you seen Fisk and Paul?" he asked conversationally.

"Not for a while. Lazy bastards are probably dozing again. I sent Danny to check."

"I'll deal with that later," said Sterling absently, and got into the driver's seat. The Ford pulled out of the yard and headed off into the darkness.

Jim's teeth were clenched so hard, he found it difficult to relax his jaw enough to speak to his companions.

"Come on, back to the car..."

Before he could get to his feet, Fisk and Paul stood in front of them with another man, whose gun was levelled at Jim.

“We got them!” shouted Fisk to his colleague in the yard. “Three workers got out! Come here and help deal with them!”

And at that moment, three men walked into the yard leading a string of horses – eight animals in all; nervous, wild-eyed and jittery, as if they could sense the imminent violence.

At the commotion, the gunman’s attention shifted slightly and Piotr saw his chance, making a dive for him. The gun went off with a muffled thud, and someone cried out. Jim couldn’t stop to see who had suffered. Leaving Piotr and the other two to Sergei, he grabbed his borrowed gun from the ground and rushed at the men in the yard, firing into the air as he did so. The horses went wild, rearing and crashing down again. The erstwhile guard had been knocked clean over and lay motionless, the three wranglers were dodging hooves to save themselves. Two new figures rushed onto the porch; the two staff from the party. Jim took them out with his borrowed semi-automatic without a second thought, and turned the gun on the nearest wrangler, who ducked and skidded into the far corner of the yard. There was a burst of fire from Sergei’s direction – the gun liberated from Fisk’s companion was now being trained on the porch, evidently intended to keep anyone else from coming out of the house. A figure flashed past him and it was Piotr – unharmed, thank God! – who gathered up a handgun belonging to the unconscious guard.

The horses were still screaming and rearing in frightened distress, and galloping round the yard. In the confusion, Piotr’s fire brought one of the wranglers to the ground, and Jim managed to disable the other two in a similar fashion. Piotr ran up to him.

“Now, to car, yes?”

Jim looked back at the house, then to where they left the car. There must be other vehicles around, but... seconds counted. And one mode of transport would serve so much better over the rough ground where Sandburg was being taken.

“No time,” he growled. He grabbed Piotr’s borrowed handgun and thrust the semi at him. “Keep everything locked down. If you can find a phone, call for assistance.”

“And you?”

Jim wasn’t listening. He leapt at the nearest careering horse, its bridle and stirrups flailing wildly in the night, and swung himself into the saddle. The horse reared again, but Jim sat firm, pressed hard with his legs and tugged at the horse’s mouth.

“Come on, my beauty,” he crooned. “Help me save a life this time!”

He swung out of the compound at a gallop, leaving Sergei and Piotr open-mouthed, and still surrounded by an equine disaster zone.

\*

Jim flew. The horse pounded through the moonlight, wind rushing through its mane and across Jim's face. Neither man nor beast hesitated at any obstacles. The full moon made no difference to Jim; he could see every depression and every ridge stretching for miles in front of him, and, in the foreground, he was innately aware of the fence-wire and gates that appeared in front of them as they sped forward. The horse soared, clearing them all safely. It snorted its delight, as if sensing payback for all the evil it had witnessed on this ranch.

Jim could easily make out the Ford's trail, both by sensing the heat from its exhaust which it left along the rough tracks and by seeing the momentary blink of its tail-lights and headlights as it cleared the ridges. The vehicle made relatively slow progress along the unmade track through the sagebrush, and the driver still had no inkling of the sudden change of circumstances he had left behind. The pickup was clearly making for a known spot, but its slow speed, bumping over the rocks and brushwood, gave the horse an advantage.

This was no time to hesitate; no time to stop and consider, to assess, to contemplate. Jim rode for Blair's life – for both their lives. His blood sang in his ears and he felt the ripple of the gelding's muscles beneath his legs – he was at one with the creature; completely centred, completely calm, completely prepared. Completely deadly.



The horse cleared a small rise and there was the pickup - mere yards in front. His vision homed in on Blair, crumpled on the truck-bed at the base of cab. Lutsevich was standing



over him, leaning on the cab roof and looking ahead into the moonlit scrub. Blair's eyes were open, but his expression was empty.

And then he saw! Blair saw, or sensed, the rider in the darkness, and looked up, at first as though at his nemesis and the instrument of his own death, and then with wonder as the beast thundered alongside. Lutsevich's reactions were leaden – the evening's scotch had helped with that. So, as Jim sailed off the horse and into the back of the pickup, grabbing Lutsevich around the waist to bring him down, the other man was taken completely by surprise. Jim lifted his opponent bodily and flung him off the back of the Ford into the dirt. A split-second later, the Ford braked sharply – Sterling no doubt reacting to the sudden appearance of a riderless horse careering off into the beam of his headlights. Jim grabbed Blair by the waist to haul him up, but his friend cried out, involuntarily, and Jim dropped him like a hot brick in his concern. He bent down again to Blair's level.

"Chief!"

"Jim, it's okay! Help me, help me up!"

Jim lifted him up again, but by now Sterling was out of the cab, gun in hand. Jim took a dive himself out of the back of the Ford, Blair in his arms. He landed heavily on the ground, making sure he took all of Blair's weight as the man landed on top of him. The impact stunned him for a second, knocking all the air out of his lungs. Blair rolled off him and screamed a warning.

Jim rolled to the side as well, but not before Sterling had fired. He felt the bullet strike home, and reflexively brought his arm tight to his body to shield his wounded side. With his other arm he brought up his gun and fired, but Sterling had dodged behind the Ford. Jim gathered Blair up again, hugging him tightly as he did so.

"Jim! You're hurt!" Blair was plucking at his shirt.

"Nothing we can't fix. Get down, Chief!" A bullet pinged at the Ford's metalwork.

"Take the gun, Blair!" he shouted, thrusting the handgun into Blair's hand. His friend brought the weapon to bear on the Ford's cab, rattling off a series of neat shots across its rear window. Ignoring the pain in his side, Jim rolled into the shadows behind the pickup, to where he guessed Lutsevich had fallen, and rolled right into the man's inert form. The fall had broken his neck. Lutsevich lay staring upwards, the full moon reflected in his open eyes. Jim grabbed the man's handgun and rolled back to Blair.

They dodged another volley of shots from Sterling, but before he could fire again, Jim heard something he thought would never come.

Helicopter rotors.

He turned to scan the western horizon. Far, far out, he could see the lights of an aircraft; somewhere below there was the dust trail, pale in the moonlight, of a convoy of cars. He grinned madly at Blair and ruffled his friend's short hair. Blair looked at him like he'd gone completely insane.

"Sterling!" he shouted. "The police are coming - armed response. The helicopter will be here any second. It's over. We've two guns against your one. Give yourself up now before I shoot you!"

Sterling's response was to fire again, and then to jump into the cab. He flung the vehicle into reverse, and floored the pedal; Jim only pulled himself and Blair away from where they sheltered at the rear of the Ford in the nick of time. Then Sterling took off, changing direction to the west and haring off as fast as the pickup could go through the scrub. Jim watched the tail-lights recede.

"Helicopters?" asked Blair, incredulously.

"Just the one," smiled Jim. He dropped to his knees on the ground and took his friend's face in his hands. His blood smeared on Blair's skin, making the young man's face even bloodier than before. They gazed at each other, both seeing the same thing; that each man was at the end of his resources. Blair's smile lit up the night, but even as he returned it, Jim could see that flame flicker. Consuming pain was returning to his friend's consciousness as the adrenaline from the last few minutes' firefight started to fade. His own side throbbed like a bitch and it was worryingly wet and slippery. They clung to each other, Jim with his face buried in Blair's hair, rocking him, while Blair just repeated his name like a mantra – "Jim, Jim, oh Jim, thank God, thank God..."

Then Jim's head jerked up suddenly.

"Sterling! I have to find him!"

Blair's eyes widened in horror.

"No! Let him go! We have plenty of evidence now!"

Jim stroked Blair's cheek, brushing away the involuntary tears that mingled with the blood.

"You know he was the one behind it all?"

"He told me," said Blair urgently. "He told me himself. Everything. Everything from this bastard, fucking obscenity of a hunt, right up to his control over the PD!"

"Then I've got to catch him!"

"Jim! How far can you get? You're exhausted! Stay with me, please! Just stay!"

"Chief..." Jim pulled away. "... I can't. He has a plane. I saw it this morning. That's where he's going!"

"Jim, let it go! Please stay with me!"

Jim bent down and kissed Blair hard on the mouth, then gently righted him, propping up against a large sagebush.

"This one last time, Chief, and I'll never leave you again.

He ran into the moonlight and whistled, almost without expectation, but the horse appeared. Its panic short-lived, it had been grazing a short distance off in the brush. Jim swung into the saddle and saw Blair limping after him.

"Chief, stay put! If that's Simon..." Jim gestured towards the approaching faint sound, "...send him after me!"

"Jim, you sonofabitch... Can't you just let it go for once?"

"Not this time, baby. Not on your life. Especially not on your life."

In a whirl of hooves was gone. Blair threw his head back and howled at the moon; howled his rage and frustration. He knew why Jim was doing this. A man with Sterling's wealth and influence could easily slip through the clutches of officialdom as long as he avoided arrest. And if he flew away tonight, there was a good chance they'd never get to him again. Blair's own personal terror of earlier was now transferred to Jim and his damn-fool determination.

"Don't get yourself killed, you bastard!" he screamed into the night. "Don't you dare get yourself killed!"

He brushed his hand across his face, and found the stickiness left by Jim's blood. He suddenly realised what he had missed before.

Jim's blood. Sterling's bullet had hit Jim. The man was bleeding - a lot.

Oh Christ, this was even worse than he'd thought. He turned wildly, looking vainly for a means to getaway, and found it galloping towards him.

Sergei swerved to a halt in a flurry of dust and swishing tail. Blair held up his arms.

"Help me! We have to follow Jim!"

Without a word, Sergei leaned down and grabbed Blair's upper arm to bring him smoothly onto the back of the horse.

"Hold on!" he shouted, and kicked the horse to full pelt yet again.

And they galloped on into the dust and the cold moonlight, the rushing of wind past Blair's ears drowned out by the noise of the helicopter that swooped overhead, and then set off towards the west.

\*

Jim knew he was faltering. His grip felt less strong, his hands numb. The horse did not fail him, though. It sailed through the night as confidently and swiftly as before. He saw the tail-lights growing nearer, but also the faint pale outline of the Cessna, and its accompanying fuel tank, not far ahead.

"Come on, my beauty!"

The horse powered forward. Leaning into the wind, he saw Sterling leap from the Ford and head towards the aircraft. Jim and his steed thundered on and the Ford was passed in a cloud of dust. Yards ahead, Sterling ran into the brush towards the plane, and then turned to fire again at his pursuer. Jim swerved and the horse reared. The bullet passed harmlessly by, but Jim's weakened grasp wasn't enough to keep him in the saddle. He slipped to the ground, and lay there dazed for a second, fumbling for his gun which had fallen away from him. It glinted on the ground in the moonlight.

Sterling raised his hand to fire at the defenceless man. But before he could do so, the horse reared again, screaming its rage. Sterling ducked from the hooves, and Jim rolled, grabbed his hand gun and fired, catching Sterling in the knee. The man cried out and crumpled, clutching his leg. Jim stood and calmly fired again, this time at Sterling's hand. The gun flew off into the shadows of the sagebrush as Sterling once again screamed in pain, and then again as Jim's next shot hit him in the shoulder. Jim walked with exaggerated concentration towards the man, now crouched on the ground, and looked down at him, his face set.

"Taste of your own medicine, yeah? Now you know how this pain thing works."

The helicopter was by now bearing down on him. Jim turned and waved, and then swung back again to Sterling, who was shaking at Jim's feet, clutching vainly at his wounds.

"I'm instructed in such circumstances to make sure the perpetrator is suitably restrained," said Jim calmly. "Do you think you're suitably restrained, Mr Sterling?"

Jim raised his gun again, and Sterling gibbered.

"No," continued Jim, in the same detached tone. "I don't, either." He brought the hand gun across Sterling's face in a vicious backhand. The man slumped back.

"Now you are," said Jim.

\*

Sergei kicked the horse over the last few hundred yards. The helicopter was circling, its searchlight playing on the incongruous grouping of airplane, horse and men. As Sergei's mount swerved to a halt, Blair slid off, running first to the crumpled figure on the ground.

Thank Christ, Sterling! It wasn't Jim!

"Jim! Jim! Where are you? Jim!" Blair whirled in the dust storm kicked up by the landing helicopter, searching for signs of his friend. Sergei started hollering.

"Over here, Blair! He's here!"

Blair stumbled over the scrub to see Jim sitting on the ground, propped up against the small fuel tank. His friend looked up and smiled broadly.

"Hi, Chief!"

Blair's heart sank; Jim's head was swaying, and his eyes were glassy. He looked like he could barely focus on his friend. Blair slid under the plane's wing and crawled towards the tank.

"What are you doing here, man?"

"Looking for beauty," said Jim sweetly. Blair did a double-take at Jim's unexpected foray into abstract concepts until Jim called out over his head:

"Here, beauty! Come here, boy!"

Sergei, still finding his horse difficult to control in the mayhem caused by the helicopter's arrival, galloped off into the brush.

"I'll find him, Jim!" The Russian's voice came faintly from amongst the sage.

Blair realised that it was suddenly silent; the rotors had stopped turning and there was only a residual whine his ears. A familiar voice was calling – an obligatory tone of annoyance laced with genuine concern. He smiled to himself, then settled back against the fuel tank and gathered Jim into his arms, pressing hard as he did so at the wet, slippery patch on the man's side. Jim merely sighed, and buried his head in the crook of Blair's shoulder. Blair knew he was crying openly now, but didn't care. He rocked Jim and held him tight; oh, so tight.

"Stay with me, stay with me, baby! Please, stay! Stay, Jim, stay!"

"Sandburg!" came the yell. "Sandburg! Ellison! Jim! Where the hell are you! Jim!"

Blair raised a bloody hand, and waved at their rescuer.

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Simon paused briefly by the unconscious Sterling, then ploughed on into the dust.

"Sandburg! Jim! Where the hell are you?"

And then he saw the sketchy wave from the huddled figures by the small, square fuel tank.

Hell of a safe place to hide, he thought sourly. But it was griping for form's sake only. Privately, his heart was racing. Were they okay?

He saw the hand was bloody, and broke into a run.

A moment later, he was crouched on the ground in front of his two friends. Jim's eyes were shut and his breathing shallow. Blair merely gave Simon an absent smile and turned again to press his lips to Jim's temple, crooning a gentle tune that might even have been a lullaby.

"You guys got to talk then?" Simon tried for jocularly, but the weak witticism stuck in his throat. He stood quickly and turned to yell in the direction of the two figures who were now crouched over Sterling's form.

"Med team! Forget him! I want you here right now!"

## Chapter 25

There was someone new behind the desk. This time, Simon got a cup of coffee, and very nice it was, too. The new occupant of the Commissioner's office was going out of his way to ingratiate himself with Simon, which was a good start. A direct appointment by the Senator – no lobbying had been entertained – Commissioner Addison was a thorough businessman with an immediate grasp of the priorities of the PD, and, much to Simon's satisfaction, an unalloyed and very genuine horror and disgust at the machinations of Wade and the criminal set-up supporting him.

Not for the first time since Simon had been ushered into his comfortable chair, Addison gave him a haunted look.

"I still can't believe it," he said, "how deep the whole thing went. How extensive Sterling's operation was within the PD, and how Wade was able to force his influence..."

Simon toyed with his second cup of robust Colombian roast.

"With respect, sir, you have to understand how the Commissioner's office has, and is seen to have, the power of life and death over whoever works in the PD. It's a political thing, I guess. To ensure the police don't become a power in their own right, instead of a structure created for the public good. It works fine with a committed, honest Commissioner, but if the incumbent is ... well ... one of the bad guys, it takes a lot for the PD to break its natural command imperative, the hierarchy is so ingrained. Sterling and Wade were able to take advantage of that societal culture..."

Simon suddenly realised what he was saying and took a sip of coffee to cover his discomfiture.

Boy, am I channelling Sandburg, finally? Is it a disease?

Addison nodded sagely at his words nonetheless.

“Which is why I'm so grateful to the members of the PD who held out against this criminality and its influence. There was only a core of corrupt officers, but Sterling chose his targets well, where they could achieve the most impact, and cover up his various criminal enterprises.”

He paused and looked meaningfully at Simon.

“The men and women of Major Crimes are an exceptional example of how the PD held out. Despite Captain Bellwood's involvement with Wade, your team...” Simon couldn't help but beam at this description – his team! – “... fought back in the best way they knew how – by continuing to solve the crimes they saw around them, despite contrary orders.”

“Captain Bellwood did help finally, sir. Given my position in the PD at that time, I didn't have the authority to order the swoop on Sterling's ranch. He rose to the occasion.”

It slightly stuck in Simon's craw to mediate for Bellwood, given the way the man had stood back and let his team be decimated and side-lined, but he knew he would always feel grateful for the way the stunned man had suddenly gathered himself and thrown all his energy and resources into the rescue attempt. The guy wasn't all bad.

As if reading his thoughts, Addison nodded.

“I think Bellwood's actions at the end go a good way to mitigating his tendency to stand back and let Wade's agenda play out. There will be a disciplinary action, of course, but I think Bellwood will experience a sideways move at most. He wasn't on the take, just far too ready to turn a blind eye when asked. I think he's ashamed of his weakness and I wouldn't be surprised if a better cop emerges from this. I've never seen a man so contrite. Even Agent Zuckerman has apologised. He'll do okay in the Bureau; a good agent, single-minded and tenacious. He just needs better judgment, and that should come with experience. Oh, and don't even think about the Dammer accusations. I've had a word with the Cascade Bar Association. They'll make Mr Dammer aware of the dangerous ground he'll be on if he pursues his case against Detective Ellison.”

Addison poured Simon another cup without asking, in easy familiarity.

“There will of course be multiple actions now against many of your PD colleagues who were involved with Wade. And as to the individuals caught up in Sterling's perverted hunting game... well, the full weight of the justice system will fall on them all, I promise you. Hopefully that will go some way to make up for the deaths and maltreatment suffered. And

we have at least reunited a lot of families with their loved ones, the redoubtable Miss Xui Li included. But the layers and layers of criminal activity involved with immigrant labour that Sandburg and Ellison uncovered, from people trafficking to indenture and outright slavery...”

His anger suddenly surged to the fore and he slapped his hand on his desk.

“No society should dare to call itself civilised where these things exist! It stops now! There will be no more slavery in Cascade! The PD will make sure of that!”

It was a noble sentiment, but they both knew how difficult it would be to achieve that aim. Simon let the moment pass in judicious silence. Visibly calming himself, Addison drank some more coffee and changed tack.

“Now, tell me, Captain Banks, how are our two heroes doing now?”

“Much better, thank you, sir. Detective Ellison needed quite a lot of blood – he'd lost a lot from his bullet wound and that caught up with him right at the end. But he's remarkably resilient. And we're pretty hopeful Sandburg is out of the woods now.”

Out of the woods. That phrase hardly did justice to the monumental worry of Blair's medical condition over the last two weeks. How he had managed the last desperate ride through the night to find Jim was a mystery, but had he not, Simon didn't like to think of the consequences. Such was the confusion at the ranch site when the helicopter arrived, with men and vehicles spread out in every direction, fleeing from the approaching US Marshalls' trucks, it had been near impossible to pinpoint where his friends might be. Then Simon had seen the horse in the searchlight and suddenly there had been Blair's small, bloodied face looking up at him from where he hung on tight to the back of the horse-rider, yelling wildly and gesticulating. Simon knew for certain that Blair would be heading for Jim; and wherever Jim was, that was the eye of the storm.

If Blair hadn't gone for Jim, then Simon, the MC team and the Marshalls would have wasted precious minutes in the chaos at the ranch house, and there would have been a real chance that Sterling could have got away, leaving Jim bleeding out in the dust. But the ride had taken the last of Blair's strength. He had collapsed the moment the med team took Jim from him, adrenaline alone keeping him upright until then. Only when they got him to the hospital did they discover the extent of his injuries and their severity. There had been broken ribs – the Sandburg signature – but, far more worryingly, major bruising to his internal organs and a real concern at one point about permanent damage to them, not to mention the concussion caused by the blows to his head he had suffered in the beatings. Simon and the doctors treating Blair had been very concerned whether, in his weakened state, the young man would be able to fight the fever that had overcome him by the time they had got him to Spokane.



'Very concerned' of course didn't come close to Jim's reaction. As soon as he had been able to move, the man had been a weak, pale and heavily-bandaged presence at Sandburg's bedside for days on end until Blair's natural resilience started to kick in and his vitals showed clear signs of his body healing. The day the fever broke and Blair was lucid again, Simon didn't think he'd ever seen Jim so emotional, so happy.

It went both ways, of course. Simon knew he was too old-fashioned to let his own feelings show much, but it was abundantly clear that Sandburg and Ellison had done, and would do, much more than just talk, and he was enormously happy that his two friends had found what they had both been looking for, so close to home and right under their noses. He had been a mite surprised at himself for taking so long to realise the depth of their connection and where it was heading. Call yourself a detective, Banks? But once he'd got over the initial shock, he saw it as the most natural outcome in the world.

"Well," continued Addison, "I hope very much that both Detective Ellison and Detective – I mean Doctor, I mean, Mr Sandburg – will continue to form a key part of Major Crimes going forward." He frowned. "Sandburg – what is he, anyway?"

Simon grinned.

"To be honest, sometimes we're not clear ourselves. But I'm pretty sure he'll be Doctor Sandburg pretty soon."

Simon thought he could express it with such confidence. He had after all been addressing Blair's Dissertation Committee that very morning to make Blair's case, laying on the hero stuff with a shovel, let alone a trowel, and doing his own type of obfuscation to convince the Committee that Sandburg's admission of fraud had only been part of his general undercover role. Rainier were impressed, not to say astounded, and watching the various professors' reactions, Simon reckoned he could see the rehabilitation of Blair Sandburg and the accruing credit to Rainier sparking into life as they listened. He didn't stint his emphasis on wanting Sandburg the academic to continue his association with the PD, but now in a structured, stipended way with full recognition of Blair's talents and abilities. This was the line he took with Addison, setting out his case for Blair as an official consultant to the PD, working closely with Major Crimes, bringing to bear all his immense knowledge and initiative to crime-solving, and being officially recognised for it.

"I have no doubt about that young man's capabilities," said Addison, rummaging in his desk drawer, "and clearly an awful lot of people out there share my view, but, you know, from the strangest sources?" He gave Simon a bemused look, pulled a fat folder out of the drawer and started leafing through it, turning it round towards Simon so he too could see the contents.

"Since I got here, this office has been overwhelmed by correspondence in Sandburg's support. Phone calls, letters, petitions... look at them all. The Lower East Side Elderly

Residents Association, the Holy Order of St Sebastian, Rainier Student Union, the Firefighters' Association, the Working Girls' Support Collective..." – Simon almost choked on his coffee at that one - "... Cascade Kids Support System, a very vocal young ADA called Beverley Sanchez who's got the whole DA's department up in arms, and a number of... you might call them 'instructions', though they border on the line of 'threats'... from the FBI, Fish and Wildlife, ATF, the DEA... and that's only a fraction. Plus, there have been strange anonymous phone calls from Central America – untraceable, of course. We did wonder about those, but the weight of the evidence is, I must say, all to the positive. Look, we've got letters from a Catholic mission in Peru, passing on comments from the local ... er ... populace. And only last week, someone sent us a quiver of arrows. I'm assuming this is some kind of academic in-joke, so to speak, but..."

He looked hopelessly Simon for a steer.

"He seems to have a lot of friends, your Mr Sandburg." Addison finished lamely.

It was all Simon could do to suppress his broad grin. That Rhonda – when she had a mission, woe betide anyone who got in her way!

"Yes, sir." He agreed. "Blair Sandburg has a lot of friends."

"But I've also read your paper, Captain Banks," continued Addison, closing the file of letters. "It's an admirable piece of work, well thought-through."

"I've had a considerable amount of time on my hands recently, sir," replied Simon, modestly.

And it was true that the hours of insomnia that had accompanied Simon's enforced absence from the PD and the worry that surrounded it had provided time for deep and productive thinking about how the PD could operate in a more ideal world.

Addison smiled wryly.

"I like your view of Major Crimes in future, and Doctor..." - he emphasised the title - "... Sandburg's role in it, working with Detective Ellison. Given Ellison's skills, I agree it makes sense that he and Sandburg are seen as an elite team. I hope we can ensure that Detective Ellison gets the opportunity to utilise all his many abilities?"

Addison looked significantly at Simon, who allowed himself a little smile.

"I think that can be arranged, sir. And though initially – God, it seems aeons ago now but in fact it's merely weeks – initially we had planned that Blair would be recruited as a police officer, you know from my paper I think that's underplaying his background. I want Sandburg to be the first of many crossovers with academia, bringing new knowledge and different approaches to a multidisciplinary PD, making us truly a crime-fighting force for the new century."

"I'm fully supportive of all that, Captain Banks, but I also hope that there will be opportunities for me to consult you on your thinking about the PD as a whole; an advisory link, if you will. If, of course, you're sure I can't tempt you away from Major Crimes?"

Addison was smiling, and Simon grinned back openly.

"I'd be honoured to make any input I can to your strategy development, sir. But there's a desk in Major Crimes with my name on it, and I'm eager to get back there."

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Simon had left Addison's office with barely a twinge from his injury, he recognised with pleasure, but with promises of citations, honours and the unstinting support of the Commissioner's office ringing in his ears. Now he stood on the terrace in front of the City Hall in the spring sunshine. Some late cherries bloomed beside him, and Cascade stretched out before him. He saw the high rises and the low rises, the boulevards and the alleys, and the sparkle of the sea far beyond. Hardly Sentinel vision, but it was okay by him.

He extracted a cigar from his inside pocket, and lit it. He allowed a few moments for it to draw, and then savoured the rich aroma while he contemplated his next tasks.

First, the regular hospital visit to see what mayhem his two colleagues – transferred from Valley Hospital in Spokane back to Cascade General once Blair's condition had improved enough - had created on that fine day, and who in the medical elite they had pissed off now. Thankfully, they would be home in a few days, and then they could be crotchety on their own... No, Simon corrected himself, they were crotchety because they weren't on their own right now. He knew they longed for the privacy of their own home where Jim's senses could calm and where Blair could recuperate fully with his books and artefacts around him.

And with Jim. Simon had no doubts that their rollercoaster relationship of the past few years had now changed into something even stronger, lasting and on equal terms. It was still going to be an exciting ride; but with those two, what else could it be?

He took another drag at his cigar.

And after the hospital visit, back to Major Crimes, a briefing to the team, the conveying of official thanks and congratulations, the private celebration of friends vindicated. Except there was the tricky situation of Connor, Rafe and Brown still to smooth over, given the continued bitching from all three of them about how 'certain colleagues had excluded certain other colleagues'. He suspected it was time he knocked heads a bit...

He extinguished his cigar and started down the path to the street to get a cab.

Ah well, into every life a little rain must fall. And, so far, this had been a pretty damn good day.

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FIN

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