

The Road to Hell

by Bluewolf

art by alynt

The road to hell, they say, is paved with good intentions. But even Naomi wasn't absolutely sure just how good her intentions were when she sent the first draft of Blair's dissertation to Sid Graham.

She told herself they were, but she had to admit that despite her own success in life, she wanted to add a little vicarious satisfaction, a little vicarious sense of accomplishment, through her son's success. And although she liked and even respected Jim, Simon and the rest of the detectives in Major Crime, and was happy that Blair had such apparently dependable friends while he lived in Cascade, she really would prefer it if he no longer had to work with them to obtain material for his dissertation, but could return to the world of academia where he would be safe.

'It's just a first draft and it needs a lot of work,' Blair had said.

'You've always been your own worst critic,' she'd replied. 'Why don't you let me read it. I'll give you some feedback.'

'It's just not good enough yet,' he'd answered before rushing off to meet Jim, calling, 'Make yourself at home - be back about six!' as he went.

Alone, she sat and thought about it for several minutes. Was he planning on rewriting it all?

She knew all about the concept of write something, then scrap that first draft and redoing it all from scratch. It had never worked for her - doing that always lost something, she felt; the rewrite always felt somehow pedestrian. Oh, she had gone over the various short stories, articles and books she had written, looking for typos and punctuation mistakes, rewording the odd scene she wasn't happy with or even on her editor's advice, but what she had submitted, what had been published, was always an edited first draft, not a totally rewritten one.

She gave a wry smile, wondering what Blair would say if he knew about her writing - mostly fiction, using one pen name, but also some magazine articles and travel books using a different one. He had never asked about the source of the money that let her spend her life travelling, probably assuming she was still using the money her father had left her, but - even though she had husbanded it carefully and never squandered her resources - she had known right from the start that her inheritance would not last indefinitely. Initially unwilling to settle anywhere, when she decided she might one day run low on funds she had fallen back on what had been her best subject at school - writing essays. Imaginative or factual, her grades for them had always been excellent. 'Essays' had become short stories, and from short stories and factual articles for magazines it had not taken long for her to stretch her wings and begin to write full-length novels and travel books.

She was still careful with her money, although there was little need now to be so; her books were popular and sold well, and even if she never wrote another one she had enough to let her continue living her present lifestyle for another fifty years and more.

Blair had the same gift that she had for putting words together in an interesting and entertaining way; indeed, she sometimes thought that he was better, at least on the factual side. So his claim that he needed to go over his dissertation, rework it in some way, had to be self-criticism - and as she had said, he had always been his own worst critic, always sure that his best wasn't nearly good enough.

He didn't want her to read the thing yet. He wanted to second draft it before letting her see it.

All right. But she knew, from having her own work read by someone else before it was published, how valuable the comments of someone else could be. And who better to read the thing and give Blair some professional advice than her own editor at Berkshire Publishing? And if the dissertation was as good as Naomi was sure it was, Sid wouldn't need to give much input.

Surely, *surely* Blair would believe the word of a professional editor who said the thing was good!

And so she phoned Sid, who agreed to have a look at the document, and emailed it to him.

She had been unsurprised by Sid's enthusiastic response to the document - but flabbergasted by Blair's unenthusiastic response to Sid's enthusiasm.

'He said it wasn't for publication,' Sid told her. 'I offered him a really good advance for it, and he still said no. But I'm sure it's just a writer's first-book nerves; a little publicity, a few extracts released in the right places... once he sees how much interest there is, it's bound to give him confidence in his work. And the man he describes as a sentinel - he has to know that once people can see just what he can do, how much good he could therefore do for society, he'd want them to know, so he's bound to encourage Blair to agree to publication.'

'Sid? Remember, I didn't read it; I don't know anything about it. What's a sentinel?' Blair had spoken about sentinels quite a lot ever since he found that ancient book - what was it again? Something about Paraguay... but he had never really said what a sentinel was, other than a watchman, a tracker, someone who could forecast weather - and she hadn't bothered to ask for more information than that, sure that 'sentinel' was a word like 'shaman', something that simply indicated a person's position, status, in a tribe.

And Sid had explained. Naomi listened with growing horror. It made so much sense of Blair's answer when she said, 'I think Jim would be so happy that your work was being published.' She had been really surprised when his reply to that had been, 'No, I can pretty much guarantee that he wouldn't.'

No. He wouldn't. She could understand that now. Jim could only be effective as a sentinel if his abilities remained a secret; a civilized society was nothing like a tribal one, where someone with heightened senses would certainly be a valued asset.

Why hadn't Blair *told* her what his dissertation had really been about? But she knew. She had been so careful with her own 'hidden' identities. Although her hippy days had only lasted for a few experimental months, she projected the still-a-hippy public image to protect those identities, so of course Blair had doubted that she could keep a secret.

But his final response, his determination to protect his sentinel, had destroyed his academic reputation.

Oh, in a way she could understand it; it was his responsibility, as an ethical researcher, to protect his sources, and the easiest way to do that was to declare himself unethical. Even Sid had finally understood and accepted that Blair's 'unnecessary' second draft wasn't to improve the wording but to change all the names; but of course the excerpts he had released had included Jim's real name.

After Blair's press conference, he admitted as much to the ex-student. 'But you're an excellent writer,' he added. 'And if you write something that *is* meant for publication, as I hope you will, I'd very much appreciate getting the chance to do that publication, with the

same sort of deal you turned down for your dissertation. Anyone who can write a dissertation as readable as that... You're a really good writer, Blair.'

Sid wasn't exactly Blair's favorite... well, acquaintance, at the moment, not after the way the man had gone totally against Blair's wishes, but he had, after all, apologized for the way he had ridden roughshod over Blair's objections. 'If I did, I'd have to use a pen name,' Blair said.

'A lot of writers do,' Sid told him. He had the sense to leave it at that, trusting that Naomi would manage to persuade her son that writing - whether fiction or non-fiction - could be a very lucrative proposition. Although many writers couldn't make a living from it, all Blair needed to do was produce something that caught the public interest; and Sid was quietly certain that he could.

On the afternoon that Blair went to clear out his office at Rainier, Naomi was surprised when Jim invited her to visit the bullpen the next day - "We've got a surprise for Blair," he said, "and we know he's going there tomorrow." But he gave no indication of what that surprise was. Naomi sighed mentally - yes, Jim had to see her as someone who would undoubtedly let slip what she knew, if she knew anything, and she began to think seriously of improving her image. But she was horrified when the surprise turned out to be Simon's offering Blair a detective's badge, though she managed to hide her reaction, letting everyone think that she was pleased for him, and as hopeful as all the detectives in the room clearly were that he would accept.

At least their reaction was more positive than the hostile one Blair had been given at Rainier!

In a way, that surprised her. Of course, his fellow cops had to have guessed that there was more to Jim than met the eye, had to have guessed that there was some reason Simon had managed to keep a ninety-day observer's pass active for another thousand days after it expired; but she was also quite sure that at least some of Blair's fellow academics had probably stretched or adjusted their facts to match their theories, and that their reaction to Blair's 'admission' had mostly been the 'holier than thou' attitude of someone as guilty as hell of doing the very thing Blair claimed he had done, but who hadn't been 'caught'.

She had been planning to move on soon in her usual 'never stay anywhere for long' fashion, but decided to stay until she could get a chance to speak to Blair on his own, without Jim's hovering presence. That opportunity came two days later, when Jim had a late morning appointment with the doctor regarding his injured leg; although he was still limping, Jim was hoping to persuade the doctor to let him return to at least light duty.

Blair clearly thought he should go with Jim; Jim, however, argued that he could manage perfectly well on his own, and that Blair should take the chance to spend the time with his mother. Naomi was well aware of his unstated 'You never know when you'll see her again, she mightn't come back this way for months'. Inclined for a moment to resent Jim's assumption, honesty compelled her to admit that it wasn't unjustified. After all,

airheadedness was an image she'd been at considerable pains to project and maintain, even though she would have preferred seeing Blair more often than roughly once a year.

But perhaps... just perhaps... this was her opportunity to rescue Blair?

Once Jim was safely away, she said, "You didn't actually say anything definite when Simon offered you that badge. Do you have doubts about it?"

Blair hesitated for a moment. "I'm just wondering what sort of reaction I'd get at the Police Academy. I know academic fraud isn't the same as - well - theft, or anything like that; I doubt many people care about it, or even think it's important, but... "

Naomi nodded. "I hear that. Something else occurred to me, though. If you stay, become Jim's official partner, won't people at the PD start to wonder why? Why he's accepting you? I'm happy that Simon thought you'd be a good permanent partner for Jim," she lied, then continued with her argument. "But as I understand it, Jim's pretty well known as a man who doesn't easily forgive... well, anything, and using his name, giving him those attributes in a document, even though you subsequently claimed it was fraudulent... wouldn't people who know him wonder why he forgave that? Might some of them start to wonder if the document really was true? It could be dangerous for Jim."

She knew instantly from the look on his face that she had found the one argument that might persuade him that it was time for him to move on.

"Jim always said he didn't need the bad guys to know he had an edge," Blair said quietly. "I only used his name in the first draft to help me concentrate on what I was writing. The second draft would have changed his name. After Simon offered me the badge, I wondered about the Academy, I wondered what I'd do if a defense lawyer brought up the subject to plant doubt about my testimony any time I had to give evidence in court - but I didn't think beyond that."

"And you need to protect Jim, don't you? That was why you threw away your academic career. You didn't hesitate for a moment once you realized you had to protect him."

"I... yes."

"So to continue protecting him, maybe you need to leave. I know you don't want to, but... " She managed to sound unhappy about it. Inclined to say more, to labor the point even more, she firmly repressed the urge, knowing that now she'd planted the seed in Blair's mind his overactive imagination would allow it to grow... and grow... Best to leave guilt gnawing at his conscience, let it seem to him that the decision was his.

Naomi wasn't really given to introspection; but she knew why she didn't need anyone, hadn't allowed herself to need anyone since she was ten - the year her mother disappeared, deserting her husband and four children. They had never heard from her again.

The lesson in distrust had been relearned - or perhaps it had just been reinforced - when she was sixteen; swept off her feet by a handsome charmer nearly twenty years older, she had been shattered by his reaction to learning she was pregnant. Not that she had *needed* him; even as young and as besotted as she was she hadn't expected him to marry her; but she had expected him to be happy with the news that he was to be a father. Instead he had berated her for not being more careful, told her bluntly that he wasn't sacrificing his marriage for a teenage tramp, and walked away.

She hadn't even suspected that he might be married.

She never trusted anyone again. All her relationships from then on were superficial, even the ones with her father and three brothers. Indeed, if they had been less than totally supportive at that point in her life, she would have cut them out of it completely. As it was, Naomi lived at home for some years, managing to hide how little she trusted anyone. She had been happy when her father inherited a house in Fort Worth and moved there, taking Naomi and two-year-old Blair with him - it took her away from Cascade, the place where her trust had been twice betrayed. But after her father died four years later, she took her share of the money he had left and began to travel. Her oldest brother, who had met the girl he married when he was visiting his father, and stayed there because Marta was unwilling to move to Washington State, persuaded her to leave Blair with him and his wife, and although she visited when the schools were on holiday and even took Blair to several countries over the next few years, she was actually grateful to David for taking responsibility for his nephew. It left her free to lead her own life.

She had thought that sixteen was perhaps a little young for Blair to start university, and was less than happy that he had chosen Rainier, but she had not objected, feeling that being away from home, being at university, would teach him to be self-sufficient, teach him not to rely on anyone. She had known, as he had not, that although he felt 'all grown up' at sixteen, his eighteen-or-nineteen-year-old fellow freshmen would consider him 'still a child' and, while not necessarily ostracizing him, would certainly not socialize with him. And she had been right. He had eventually formed friendships, but they had not been close ones.

Temporarily a little concerned when Blair found a father substitute in one of his lecturers, she had been relieved when, at the end of Blair's second year at Rainier, Dr. Stoddard had resigned and left America on what had become a series of expeditions to study remote tribes. She hoped Blair would see it as an abandonment, something that would encourage him to keep other people at arm's length so that he would be protected from further hurt, though he never did say how he felt about it.

Then Blair had met Jim - she was still not sure how or where - and before she knew it, had moved into Jim's loft apartment.

She had never been happy that Blair and Jim had become friends, but hadn't realized just how close that friendship was. The press conference had finally let her see how unhealthily attached to Jim Blair had allowed himself to become. Oh, she had friends - though it might be more accurate to call them acquaintances - all over the world, people she liked, people

she was happy to visit occasionally, people she knew liked her, but she had never allowed herself to become dependent on any of them. Apart from Sid - and her relationship with him, although very amicable, wasn't based on friendship - it was a case of out of sight, out of mind. She didn't need them. Even Blair... Yes, she loved Blair, would have been happy to see him more often over the years, but she didn't *need* Blair.

But now that Blair was grown, it might be pleasant to spend time with him, at least for a while. And it would get Blair away from Jim. Naomi was sure that his naive trust in Jim was misplaced, that one day Jim would turn and betray that trust. She knew Jim had reacted badly to the media circus that had followed the release of extracts of the dissertation, and his response to Blair's press conference had surprised her.

Yet, at the same time... Why had they offered Blair a detective's badge? Had Jim persuaded Simon Banks to do it, because he wanted to keep using Blair as Naomi was sure he had been doing for the past three years? Was he picking Blair's brains, using the amazing breadth of Blair's knowledge, taking the entire credit for many arrests that would probably never have been made but for that knowledge?

The memories passed swiftly through her mind as she waited for Blair's response to her suggestion. She could see the indecision on his face, the conflict, and... yes, the unhappiness as he said at last, "You could be right. Maybe it *is* time for me to leave. Though... where could I go? I won't be able to continue in academia - if I tried to get an academic job anywhere they'd be bound to want references, and one thing Rainier certainly won't do now is give me a reference. Chancellor Edwards is more likely to tell anyone who asks that I'm totally unreliable."

"You don't need that," Naomi said. "You could come with me for a while. Think about writing a book. Sid told you he'd be interested in publishing anything you were to write."

"Writers don't make that much money," Blair said, ignoring as irrelevant the advance Sid had offered. "I've had anthropological articles published; I know how much I could expect to make - "

"No, no, you don't understand," Naomi interrupted. "This wouldn't be the same thing at all. You wouldn't be writing for a specialist magazine with a relatively limited readership, you'd be writing for the general public - a potential readership of millions." She paused for a moment, then went on, deliberately being somewhat vague. No need yet for Blair to know just how many books she had written. "I know - through Sid - something of how it works. You get an advance for a book - fiction, non-fiction, it doesn't matter. You live off that while you write. Then once the book is published you get royalties; maybe... oh, say \$1 for every copy sold. If it sells fifty thousand copies, that's \$50,000. OK, that includes your advance, but it's still a pretty good income, especially if you can turn out a book a year; and something that catches the public's attention, makes the best seller list, well, that'd sell a lot more than fifty thousand copies.

"I've always known you're a good writer, and Sid obviously thought so as well. It could be worth trying, at least." She hesitated for a split second. She wanted Blair to forget his time

with Jim and the Cascade PD, but... "You saw a lot in the years you worked with Jim. You know how a police department works. Why not try writing a detective novel? Even a series of novels? You could base them on some of the things you saw - one armed robbery is much the same as another, after all; with the names changed, who would know if it was based on fact?"

Blair looked thoughtful. "We always did make sure that any evidence Jim presented was something that would hold up in court," he said. "You really think it would work?"

"I don't see why not," Naomi said.

She wished it was possible to leave before Jim returned from his visit to the doctor, but knew that it was more than likely that he would walk in when Blair was in the middle of getting his things packed - and she didn't want to give Jim the chance to change Blair's mind. So she did say one more thing - "It might be best not to tell Jim you're thinking of leaving. He'd try to persuade you to stay, even though it wouldn't be in his best interests."

Blair nibbled his upper lip, then nodded reluctant agreement. He glanced at the time. "I'd better make a start on lunch," he said. "Jim shouldn't be long now."

"Can I help?" she asked, well aware that Blair's cooking skills were far better than hers.

"No, it's okay," Blair said. "You go and meditate for a while - " He was aware that she hadn't meditated for a day or two, which was unusual.

"If you're sure," she said.

"I'm sure," he said, and moved into the kitchen area.

She was, in fact, far from sure that meditation did anyone any real good, but it was one of the things she had adopted as part of her surface persona, and so she lit one of Blair's candles and sank into a half lotus in front of it.

Far from meditating, though, as she sat there she was carefully planning a course of action.

A lot would depend on whether the doctor had cleared Jim to go back to work, even part-time. If he had, then she would have several hours, probably at least three, four if she was lucky, the first day Jim was back at work, to get Blair away - she was quietly certain that as long as she was there, Jim would persuade Blair to stay with her instead of going with him.

Really, Jim was surprisingly thoughtful - if only he wasn't a pig!

She had been sitting for almost half an hour when the door opened and Jim came in. Blair reacted instantly - "Jim! What did the doctor say?"

"I can go back tomorrow for half days as long as I stick with desk work."

Blair grinned. "That means you'll be helping everyone else with their paperwork?"

Jim made a face. "Probably. It could also mean studying some cold cases, see if I can come up with anything."

"Sometimes all those old cases need is a fresh pair of eyes," Blair said.

Naomi carefully didn't move for some minutes after Jim's return. She was aware that he glanced at her, then lowered his voice, clearly not wanting to risk disturbing her meditation. She had to strain to hear what he said.

"Since I'll just be sitting at a desk working on reports, you don't need to come in. Take advantage of it and spend a little more time with your mom."

"Okay, Jim, and thanks. From something she said, though, I don't think she's staying more than another day at most."

"The next Academy intake isn't for nearly three months," Jim murmured. "You could maybe go with her for a week or two."

"I might do that," Blair agreed.

Inwardly, Naomi smiled. She could carry Blair off quite openly, and Jim wouldn't begin to suspect anything until it was far, far too late for him to track Blair down, for she had every intention of taking him out of the country and *keeping* him out of the country for at least a year.

Pity she couldn't make it permanent, but she would have to come back in a little less than a year to see Sid about whatever book she wrote during that time, and she would push Blair to finish a book inside that year, too. But the meeting with Sid didn't need to take long, and then they could go back to her Scottish home again. Everything else could be done by phone or email.

She raised her head and stretched. "Oh, Jim - you're back. How did it go?" *As if she didn't know - pseudo-meditation was a great way to learn secrets!*

"Starting tomorrow, I can go back for half days, as long as I sit at a desk. Blair says you're probably leaving in a day or two?"

"Yes. Not sure where I'm going, though." She was so used to shading the truth that it didn't even occur to her that she was lying.

"Well, why don't you take Blair with you, let him get a holiday? These last few days have been hard on him - he could do with a break."

"That would be lovely! Blair, sweetie, what do you think?"

Blair looked at Jim. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly.

"I won't need to use my senses while I'm on desk duty," Jim said. "Go. Have a break. I'll manage fine." He smiled reassuringly.

Blair turned his attention to Naomi. "When do you want to leave?"

She would have sneaked him away in the morning, but given Jim's willingness to let Blair have a holiday with her, she could afford to be generous. "Tomorrow afternoon? After Jim gets home? We can have lunch then go to the airport, travel standby on whatever plane has seats available."

"Okay," Blair agreed.

She hid her triumphant grin. She had won, rescued Blair from his servitude to the pigs and his unhealthy attachment to Jim.

Now she just had to make sure that he would be happy and feel fulfilled in his new life as an author.

Jim drove them to the airport next day via Blair's bank, where he withdrew almost all his money, but when he would have gone into the airport with them to see them off Naomi discouraged him, saying that they might have to wait a few hours to get a flight. So he said goodbye at the entrance and drove off. Blair hesitated, watching till the truck was out of sight, then allowed Naomi to lead him into the building.

Although Naomi had reminded him to make sure he had his passport, Blair had expected their initial destination to be somewhere inside America. At the airport, however, Naomi bypassed the domestic check-in desks and headed straight for the International ones.

Well, okay - she did manage to spend a lot of time outside America, but for the first time Blair found himself wondering how she could afford to travel so far. Even if she flew to the nearest possible Old World destination and took cheaper forms of transport thereafter, a cross-ocean flight was far from cheap. A quick mental assessment of possible land routes from east of Nepal, which she said she often visited, or west of it, led him to the conclusion that the route from Europe potentially crossed too much Muslim territory to be suitable for a woman travelling alone - and in any case he couldn't see the free-spirited Naomi accepting the female dress code of Muslim countries.

So he was quite surprised when Naomi's target check-in desk was not an Asian country, as he had expected, but Britain. He was even more surprised to discover that she was not, in fact, planning to travel standby, but that at some point in the previous twenty-four hours she had actually phoned the airport and booked tickets. First class tickets... and the name she had used when making the booking wasn't 'Naomi Sandburg', but 'Muriel Roberts'.

"Mom?" he asked, his voice confused, as they settled down in the airport restaurant.

"I'm not often so extravagant," Naomi said, "but there were only first class seats available on the overnight flight, and it's not as if I can't afford to treat us, this first day."

"You can afford... " Blair looked at her, suddenly wondering if he had ever really known her. "I know your inheritance from my grandfather wasn't a massive amount, because what he left was split between four of you, and if you've been living off that for the last twenty-four years - "

She shook her head. Time now to push the writing thing a bit. "It was enough for two or three years, but I knew almost immediately that sooner or later I'd have to do something to earn more money, so I began writing. I did some novels, and one or two travel books; that's how I know Sid - he's been my editor right from the start. No, you won't see the name 'Naomi Sandburg' on anything I've written, I always used one of two pen names, and 'Muriel Roberts' is one of them. My books have sold well, and even if I never write another I've got enough money now to last me the rest of my life. The first travel books have gone out of print because they're outdated, though rewriting them with updates is quite easy - and simpler in many ways than writing a totally new book. But even the earliest of the novels are still being reprinted, so I'm still getting royalties for them. And Blair, you're a better writer than I am, so I know that you can have a lucrative career as a writer. You can do much the same as I've done - write travel books based on places you visit, updating them every ten or twelve years, and detective novels based on things you've seen in the last four years should be quite easy, especially if you base them somewhere other than Cascade. You could even do a Gotham City and set them in a fictional town."

"Better to do that anyway," Blair muttered.

He didn't sound particularly enthusiastic, but it was a positive reaction, not a negative one, and enough to make Naomi feel optimistic.

Once again she fell silent, allowing Blair to think over what she had said. Although he had unhesitatingly turned down Sid's very generous offer for the dissertation, she was quite sure that once he saw how much a book meant for publication could earn him, he would adapt very happily to a career as a writer.

They lingered over coffee, then had a meal before going back to the waiting area close to their departure gate.

At last their flight was called, and she urged him onto the plane; and tactfully ignored the dampness around his eyes that spoke of tears resolutely repressed.

Jim took what might be called a scenic route home.

His suggestion that Blair have a holiday with Naomi had been made sincerely, but he found himself oddly reluctant to return to the empty loft, knowing that for the next several days - an indeterminate period, for nothing definite had been said by either Blair or Naomi about

when Blair would return - he would be alone there. He was not, he realized, looking forward to the solitude.

Blair had nearly three months before the next Academy intake. He might decide to stretch his 'week or two' with Naomi to nine or ten weeks.

He didn't - couldn't - grudge Blair the time spent with Naomi, but Jim found himself wishing that Blair had specified how long he would be away. God, it was only a couple of hours since he had dropped his friend off at the airport, and he was missing Blair already!

It was getting late; he stopped to buy pizza for dinner and drove home.

He wasn't as hungry as he had expected to be; quarter of the pizza was enough. He looked at the remaining threequarters, divided it into three, put two of the portions into the freezer and took the remaining portion to the fridge. And when he opened the fridge, he saw an envelope with his name on it.

Carefully, deliberately, he put the pizza into the fridge, took out the envelope, closed the fridge and crossed to sit on the couch. He took a deep breath, and opened the envelope, extracting the single sheet of paper it contained.

Jim.

I'm sorry.

Don't think I don't appreciate the offer of a badge; I do, more than you can imagine. But I've had time to think, time to talk to Naomi and...

Academic fraud isn't exactly criminal behavior. But claiming it does give me a reputation as a liar, even though I never submitted the document to Rainier. And how would a defence lawyer treat that knowledge in court, if he was questioning me? Even if the prosecution objected instantly and he was forced to retract it, one carefully-worded comment could be enough to damage, even ruin, my credibility in the eyes of a jury.

*That was my main concern. But there's more than that. Let's face it, Jim, you *are* known as a man who is slow to forgive even a perceived offense, let alone a real one. Naomi made me realize that if I stay, become your official partner, still living in your spare room, people would begin to wonder why, might even begin to suspect that, in fact... It could be dangerous for you. So...*

She's made me see that I have to leave. Permanently. I don't want to, God knows I don't want to, but your safety must take precedence over what I want.

I'm reluctant to admit it, but you haven't really needed me for a while. I think I've still helped you, but for quite some time now you haven't needed me, the way you did four years ago. I think you'll manage all right without me - just be careful if you're alone; and if you need a partner, well, Megan already knows the truth, but from their reaction when Simon offered me the badge, I'm pretty sure everyone else in Major Crime only needs a nod of confirmation. Joel, in particular, would be a good partner for you - probably better than

Megan; you play better with him. All my notes are in my room - use them however you want.

I don't know where we're going, or even if we'll ever settle anywhere for more than a few days. It'll be up to Naomi. But in any case... I'd love to stay in touch, but Naomi has convinced me that a total break is best, and safest for you.

Naomi doesn't know I'm leaving this note. I think she hopes that if I just disappear without a word you'll say 'Good riddance'. She likes you well enough, if only you weren't a cop. But I couldn't go without letting you know why. So I'm leaving this where you'll find it but she won't know it's there.

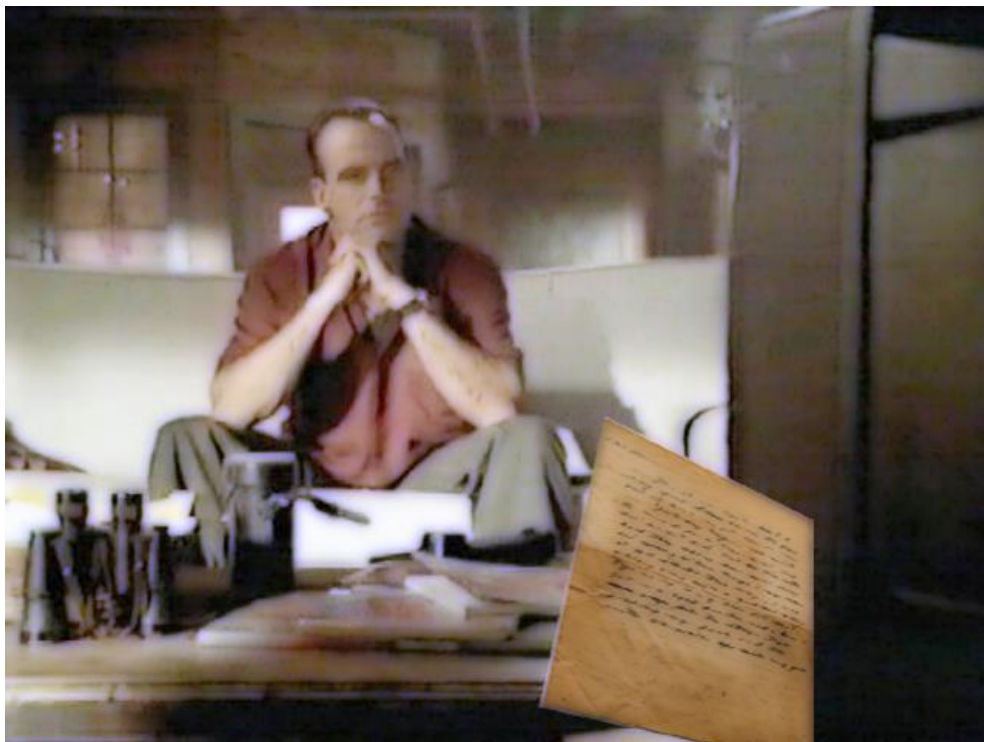
I've had to leave a lot of my stuff - just dump it. Get it out of your way.

All that's left now is for me to say goodbye. Goodbye, and thank you - for your friendship, for giving me a home, for teaching me so much... I'll never forget you.

Blair

Something about the tone of the letter... Jim read it again, and then a third time.

Not needed him? How could Blair even think that? But at the same time, he knew why. 'I got to have a partner I can trust.' His own words to Blair, uttered when they were dealing with Alex Barnes, came back to haunt him. Blair seemed to have forgiven his comment, but they were words Blair had to have remembered.



Jim had sometimes suspected that Naomi, who appeared to be a shallow, selfish throwback-to-the-sixties, was in reality an intelligent - though still selfish - woman with her own

agenda, though he was far from sure what that was. Whatever it was, though, was probably not, in the long run, good for Blair.

With his overwhelming urge to study anthropology, Blair had escaped from her once by going to Rainier and as long as he stayed there, she had 'let it go'. But now...

Blair had gone with her, not necessarily willingly but feeling - because of what she had said - that he had no real option. She had played him, oh, so cleverly; and Jim found himself wondering if she had actually known what the dissertation was about, and if she had sent it deliberately to her editor friend, hoping for... well, for what actually had happened.

Blair had gone with her, ostensibly for a holiday, urged by Jim himself - making it easy for her to... yes, to kidnap him, without his realizing it. He had gone willingly, but it was still basically a kidnap.

How easy would it be to track them down? Probably not easy at all. Blair had very little money; Naomi? Well, presumably she had some, or she wouldn't have considered flying anywhere as an option. But could he hope that she had bought tickets using her own name?

Certainly she had no reason to think that Jim would try to track where she was taking Blair. As far as she was concerned, Jim believed that Blair was simply accompanying her on her travels for a few days, and wouldn't start to wonder where they were for seven or more days when he didn't hear from them.

Jim read the note once more. *I'm leaving this where you'll find it but she won't know it's there. Why would he feel the need to do that? I think she hopes that if I just disappear without a word you'll say 'Good riddance'.*

Maybe. That did sound like something Naomi would believe. From one or two things Blair had said over the years, if Naomi decided to leave wherever she was, whoever she was with, she just did it; walked out; gave no thought to how the person she had just left would feel.

Even Blair... She claimed to love Blair, but he was lucky if he saw her once a year. Did she really love anyone but herself? But if she didn't... No, nobody was born that selfish - though her parents could have spoiled her, indulged her until she believed that she was the pivot around which everyone she met revolved.

Though again, would someone who was totally selfish get involved in environmental protests? Again, going by things Blair had said, she really had, it wasn't a fake 'life history'.

Jim shook his head. He had never really understood Naomi, never understood how anyone her age could still be living as if she were still in her teens. She had always been something of an enigma. Blair had accepted her at face value - well, during his formative years, to the best of Jim's knowledge she was the only role model Blair had had. It was surprising that Blair was as mature and generally willing to help anyone as he was. Certainly there must have been other role models in his life since he went to Rainier, but...

Forcing down his feelings of anger and betrayal, he crossed to Blair's room and went in. There might be something in there that might help him track down his guide, so that they could at least discuss the situation!

Blair had clearly made an attempt to organize things in it... but then, although Naomi been there, he *had* had time to sort through all his things. Jim suspected that Naomi had encouraged Blair to leave all this stuff to disguise - at least in the short term - the fact that she didn't plan on letting him return, assuming he had third thoughts and tried to come back to Cascade.

Among the books sitting on the bedside table were several that Jim recognized as several volumes of Blair's journal.

At any other time he would have respected Blair's privacy, understanding that as well as being a record of things he had seen and done, these held his friend's inner thoughts - but at the same time he guessed that Blair could have left them out deliberately; if he had meant them to remain private, surely he would have put them in a sealed box? So Jim picked them up, noting that they were clearly labelled with dates; the first one was dated 1975-80, the next was 1980-1982, then 1982-1985, 1986-1989, 1989-1991, 1991-1994, 1994-1996.

He took them into the living room and put six of them on the coffee table, retaining the earliest, and settled down to read.

He was surprised to discover that Naomi had led a settled life until Blair was six. It was after her father died shortly after Blair's sixth birthday that she started wandering the world - not long after Blair started keeping a journal. There was no mention of a grandmother; presumably she had died before her husband. Naomi had left Blair with one of his uncles, and Blair only saw her when she turned up to take him on holiday every summer. It was surprising how readily Blair had accepted her... well, disappearance. The journal entry simply said, 'Naomi told me she wanted to see new places, and said she'd come back every year to take me to some of them, let me see them too. She couldn't take me with her becos I have to go to school, so I'm to stay with Uncle David.'

Jim gave a half smile. Blair's attitude showed a surprising level of maturity, of understanding of a situation that couldn't have been easy for him, but the two mistakes clearly showed his youth. He considered the statement.

Blair, then, had had what was presumably a steady male role model for some ten years before he went to Rainier, and Jim found himself wondering why Blair had chosen Rainier - he would have thought somewhere closer to his family a more likely choice.

The journal entries spoke of 'Uncle David' with considerable affection, and he seemed to be on affectionate terms with his various cousins - David's two sons and daughter, and the children of two other uncles who lived in Fort Worth. The entries were fairly neutral when he mentioned 'Aunt Marta', however, and Jim wondered if Aunt Marta had resented having to look after her husband's nephew while Naomi wandered the world.

The entries went into a fair amount of detail about the different countries he saw with Naomi, and it was easy to see that his interest in anthropology had been triggered at an early age.

It was Uncle Peter who taught him welding, and Uncle Tom who was the long-distance driver of heavy rigs, who taught Blair how to drive them once he was old enough.

Jim found himself nodding. Blair's uncles had certainly done well by him. But why hadn't he looked for work with one of them, if he'd decided it would be too dangerous for Jim if he stayed? *Could be Naomi's influence*, he thought. She'd managed to separate Blair from his friends in Cascade; was she keeping him away from his other relatives as well? She had apparently been happy enough to abandon him to his uncle's care when he was a young child, but now that he was thirty she was hanging on to him. Though having a thirty-year-old son with her was an indication of her real age - and that did surprise Jim.

He read late into the night, discovering that Uncle Peter had died - cancer - in 1991 and Uncle Tom had given up long-distance driving the following year because of failing eyesight. Well, that explained why Blair hadn't gone to them... but it still didn't explain why he apparently hadn't thought of going back to Uncle David instead of heading off with Naomi, unless he believed that Aunt Marta would be less than welcoming. Of course, he might still eventually do that; Jim was quietly certain that Blair did not have the must-see-what's-over-the-next-hill restlessness that so characterized Naomi.

He took Blair's letter with him when he went to work in the morning, and took it in to Simon, who read it then looked up. "How do you feel about this?" Privately, Simon thought that Jim looked really tired and definitely stressed.

"I'm wondering if you can read the same thing between the lines that I did," Jim said.

"We've always known that Naomi wasn't exactly happy that Blair was working with... well, with... "

"With the pigs," Jim said bluntly.

"It made her reaction when we offered him the badge odd. Insincere. Two-faced, even. This... She probably guessed that 'danger to you, Blair' wouldn't discourage him, but 'danger to Jim' undoubtedly would."

Jim nodded. "I did suggest that he took a holiday with her, which gave her the perfect chance to carry him off openly. It gives her plenty of time to convince him not to come back - but I'm wondering how soon he'll realize that... well... basically she's kidnapped him."

"I think he already knows, but doesn't know what else he could do but go with her, at least in the short term. Otherwise why wouldn't he leave this letter in plain sight?"

"What I don't really understand, either, is why she wants him with her. She didn't want him when he was younger - "

"She didn't? But any time she's been here - "

"He's kept a journal since he was six," Jim said. "He took the current one with him, but left behind all his old journals. I know, it was invading his privacy, but I read them last night - spent most of the night reading them - at least the earlier ones, up to the time he started working with us. It was... quite revealing. Basically he was brought up by an uncle, and since he was six, until he started at Rainier, he only saw Naomi in the summer. Since then he's seen even less of her. It's amazing that he's as fond of her as he is."

"It's amazing how neglected children are often pathetically devoted to the parents who neglect them," Simon said quietly. He looked down at the letter again. "He may be fond of her, but from the tone of this... he sees her faults, or at least some of them. I don't think he totally trusts her."

"Yeah," Jim agreed. "We could try tracking them, but... "

"But?"

"I dropped them off at the airport, but Naomi persuaded me not to wait to see them off. Now I'm wondering... Did she give me a few minutes to get on the road back into Cascade before leaving the airport, seeking some other kind of transport to wherever she planned to take Blair? She could have taken the shuttle bus that comes back into Cascade, then gone by bus anywhere, and there would be no way to follow that trail. Even if she - they - went by bus to some other city that has an airport and flew somewhere from there - how could we find out?"

"We do have certain resources..." Simon began, with a broad grin.

"So we could maybe find out where they left from, where they went... Then what? They get a train to somewhere else, or rent a car, or even hitch-hike. Even if we knew they flew to Australia, landed in - say Adelaide, they could end up in Perth a week later, fly from there to Singapore, fly from there to Calcutta, head north from there by bus to Nepal, where we know she often spends time - even if we could follow their trail as far as Calcutta, how would we ever find them there?" Jim shook his head. "Naomi knows how to disappear, Simon. Blair was never able to find her any time he wanted to see her. The best he could do was phone some of her friends all over the world, hoping that one of them knew where she was; usually they didn't. But we don't even have that option; Blair took his address book with him."

Blair paid very little attention to where they were going. He had simply followed Naomi as she made her confident way from the booking desk, via the restaurant, to the boarding gate, then - eventually - onto the plane. The seats were comfortable, with more leg and elbow room than he had expected - somehow he hadn't realized that first class would be more

spacious than standard, he had simply always assumed the difference was in the amenities provided. The events of the last few days had worn him down and as he settled into his seat and fastened the safety belt, he found himself unable to keep his eyes open. Before the plane had even left the ground, he was fast asleep.

They had to change planes at Newark; still half asleep, Blair let Naomi lead him to the new plane, onto it, and let her settle him into his seat before he lost his tenuous grip on awareness and fell back into a deep sleep.

Naomi shook her head as she took her place beside him, only now appreciating the strain the last week or so had been on him. Maybe it had been a mistake to make this journey quite so soon; maybe it would have been better to have gone to Fort Worth first, visited David and Marta for a few days, not leaving until Blair was more relaxed... but at the same time, in Fort Worth it would have been easier for Blair to change his mind about leaving, easier for him to decide to go back to Cascade...

No. He could sleep all the way to Glasgow. The short trip on the shuttle bus taking them into Glasgow would - she hoped - give him time to waken fully, and in Glasgow they could get breakfast before continuing their journey.

She dozed intermittently as the overnight plane flew over the Atlantic. She enjoyed travelling, but preferred an overland journey, where there were things to see, to flying, where all that was visible was the sky - one reason she had decided not to fly on from Glasgow to Aberdeen, though it would have let them get there a little faster. But when a journey involved crossing water, she preferred flying to travelling by ship. A view of unbroken sky - even a star-studded sky - was boring, but unbroken water for hours or days was worse; even a holiday on a cruise ship that made regular landfall was something she had tried only once.

Blair woke as the plane touched down. He followed Naomi off the plane, through Customs and the other formalities, eventually out of the airport building, and onto a small bus that took them into the city - he only half registered the name 'Glasgow'. When Naomi moved to get off the bus he followed her again as she went into a small railway station, paying very little attention as she checked a timetable.

"Ah - I thought we'd stop here to get something to eat, but there's a train in half an hour," she said, and headed for the ticket office; half an hour later, as the train pulled out of the station, his eyes drooped shut again.

When he eventually woke, it was to find the train travelling with the sea to the right of the line, and guessed that they were now somewhere on the east coast.

"Sleep well?" Naomi asked, a touch of amusement in her voice, as he raised his head and looked around.

"I didn't realize I was so tired," he admitted. "Where are we?"

"Not very far from Aberdeen."

He thought for a moment. "There were several years we spent two weeks in a small town a little west of Aberdeen. Not every year, but five or six times before I went to Rainier?"

"Yes, in Ballater," she agreed. "That's where we're going. I loved it there, and a few years ago I bought a house there. I live there a lot of the time."

"You do?" He had always thought that Naomi spent much of her time wandering the world.

"Oh, I still do some travelling," she said, "but when I decided I wanted to put down some roots, I chose to settle in Ballater. I live there for at least eight months of the year. Remember, I write; it's not easy to concentrate on writing if I'm travelling, unless I'm working on a travel book."

He glanced at her, beginning to think that his mother had more secrets than Jim, then turned his attention back to the sea.

The train pulled in to Aberdeen station. Naomi remained sitting, letting most of the other passengers jostle their way off the train, and only moved when there were only one or two other stragglers alighting.

Despite their being the last passengers to leave the train, they had no difficulty in getting a taxi; it took them to a garage just off a main road. Naomi went into the office, leaving Blair standing outside the door with their bags, and after a few minutes a car pulled up beside him; he wasn't completely surprised to see that Naomi was driving it.

"Just put the bags on the back seat," she said. He obeyed and got into the passenger seat. She drove off smoothly, turned right when she reached the main road, and drove for some distance through what was clearly a residential area of reasonably sized houses with gardens. After two or three miles, however, they left the houses behind and entered an area of farmland.

Blair registered that Naomi was having no difficulty at all with driving on the 'wrong' side of the road, and had to remind himself that since she lived in Britain for eight months of the year, she would be used to it.

They drove through a small village, back into farmland and then into a wooded area. Not until then did Naomi say, "I'm going to introduce you as my nephew, rather than my son."

He thought about that for a moment. "How long have you actually had a house here?"

"Eleven years," she admitted.

"Didn't your neighbors wonder why, for eleven years, your family has never visited you?"

"That's at least partly why I'm going to say you're my nephew. Less likely to visit. We could explain that your father was dead, your mother couldn't travel - maybe paraplegic as the

result of the accident that killed your father? but has now died too. Remember, I've visited you. That would be consistent with the cover story."

Oh, Naomi, he thought, resignedly. That answer was so typically Naomi... and 'nephew' would hide the fact that she was old enough to have a thirty-year-old son, even though she'd never tried to hide it any time she'd visited Cascade.

"Anyway, you've been attending university - " she went on.

"Naomi, even universities have summer breaks. Even TAs working towards a doctorate get a break. But yes, because of those eleven years, I can see that nephew makes more sense than son... Though why have I come to live with you now?"

"Oh... I'd brought you here on holiday years ago, when you were just a child - which is true, and the people here know I bought the house here because I'd enjoyed coming here on holiday - and knowing that I have a house here now, when you decided you wanted a change of scenery because your mother died earlier this year, you remembered how much you'd liked it here, so asked if you could stay with me for a while."

Blair thought for a moment. As a cover story, it would work unless someone really nosey asked for details, and if they did... easy enough to say he didn't want to talk about it, and if Naomi chose to expand on it, he just hoped she'd remember to tell him any new 'facts' in his history. "Okay," he said.

"Incidentally - if you're going to be writing, have you thought what you might like to use as a pen name?"

He hadn't given the matter conscious thought, but he must, he decided, have been mulling it over subconsciously. "Burgess," he said. "J B Burgess."

"J Blair Burgess?" she asked, and he nodded. "And the J stands for?"

Jim, he thought before saying, "Joseph," and knew instantly that while Naomi would have objected to 'Jim' or 'James', she didn't associate 'Joseph' with the friend he had left in Cascade.

Soon the road began to follow a river. There were still trees on their right, trees on the other side of the river... then it was back into farmland, sheep and cattle grazing in many of the fields. *An interesting mix of land use*, Blair thought briefly. Ahead, he could see hills. When he had been here last, he had been, what... thirteen? No, fourteen, and had considered them mountains even though he had been to the Alps and knew how much higher the Alps were. Now, as well as the Alps, he had been to the Andes and the Cascades, and mentally comparing what he was seeing to these mountain ranges, he knew that the Scottish 'mountains' were mostly just hills.

After what seemed like a long time - although the journey had taken barely two hours - they drove into another small town that still, even after sixteen years, looked vaguely familiar. Naomi pulled into a space in front of a grocery store that Blair didn't remember being there sixteen years previously. "We'll need to get some things in," she said. "I've got a fair amount in the freezer and in cans, but we'll need some fresh food."

They found a shopping cart, and Blair took charge of it as he followed Naomi. She made her way up and down the aisles, occasionally putting something into the cart. She paused for quite a while at a chilled section marked 'ready meals'. *Oh, convenience meals,* he thought. *Makes sense.* Naomi, he knew, wasn't someone who enjoyed cooking.

She selected several, saying, "We can put these in the freezer - handy if we're busy. Is there anything you'd particularly like?"

He shook his head. "Anything you want to get us will do fine."

Several people spoke to her, clearly welcoming her 'home' - of course, eleven years of living here would make her known. She introduced him to some of them as "My nephew, Blair Sandburg - he'll be staying with me for a while," though Blair quickly forgot most of the names. After a while she headed for the check-out; paid for their shopping and Blair carried the bags out to the car.

She drove off, turned one or two corners, and it was only two or three minutes before she turned the car into the drive of a medium-sized house on a side road.

It took Blair two trips to take their luggage and the shopping into the house while Naomi busied herself preparing a room for him. Then she heated two of the convenience meals in a microwave, and they settled down to eat. It was Blair's first meal for nearly twenty-four hours - but despite that he wasn't particularly hungry. He forced himself to finish the meal, however, knowing that he must eat. He was, however, glad of the coffee - even though it was instant - that finished the meal.

With the dishes washed, Naomi took him into the living room and settled in front of an electric fire that formed a focal point. "It's good to be home," she murmured, and stretched, giving a long, satisfied sigh. "I think I'll be lazy for the rest of today," she said, "though I must start work on my next book tomorrow. We'll have to see about getting you a driving license for here, but that's not urgent. If you want to explore the countryside there's a cycle shop a couple of streets away where you can rent one - you don't need a license for that."

Blair nodded. He would be glad to explore a little, remind himself of some of the places he had known, though didn't remember well, years previously. In addition, it would give him the practice of staying on the left hand side of the road, with a 'vehicle' that wouldn't particularly endanger anyone - except perhaps himself - if he forgot and veered to the right.

"Have you given any thought to a possible plot line for a story?" Naomi asked after a momentary silence.

"I haven't really had time," Blair said slowly. "I seem to have spent a lot of the time since we left Cascade sleeping." He glanced at her. "I haven't been much company for you. Sorry."

"I don't think you've slept much since..." She hesitated, then admitted, "Since I had that not-so-bright idea that sending your paper to Sid for his input would help you. But I really didn't expect him to be quite so enthusiastic about it. I thought he'd treat it much like any unsolicited manuscript - look through it because I'd asked him to, make a few editorial comments, look for at least a little rewording of some of it. I certainly never thought he would want to publish it as it stood."

"It wouldn't really have mattered if I hadn't put Jim's name in it," Blair said. "Though having it published would still have... well... disqualified me from presenting it as my doctoral dissertation, because Rainier hadn't seen and assessed it first." He sighed. "I'm not sure that Rainier would have given me a doctorate on it anyway because it was based on a sample of one. Using Jim's name... Even in that first draft, it was careless. I should have thought about both those points right from the start. I could have got away with just having a sample of one if I'd... well, split him into half a dozen, spoken of 'subject A', 'subject B', etc, making it look as if I'd found several sentinels. Or if I'd leaned a little more on the ones I found working as perfumiers, wine tasters and so on, and pretended that Jim didn't have all five senses sharper than most people, making him 'subject E', with maybe sight and hearing but not the other three. But I was so proud of him, proud of what he could do. I wanted to have one record of it all, just one, to keep... before I went over it and made changes to disguise his identity."

Naomi looked at him helplessly. "For what it's worth, Sweetie - I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "Like you said, you were only trying to help. Your intentions were good."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions," she said quietly. "And that's where you are now, isn't it?"

He could only nod.

Next morning after breakfast, Naomi said, "What do you want to do today? Remember, I'm starting to work on my new book, so you'll be on your own."

"I thought I'd have a walk around the town, familiarize myself with it - I thought I recognized one or two places, but there have been changes. And I might see about renting a bike."

"If you want to have lunch somewhere in town, do - once I get started working out my plot, I won't stop until it's at least rough drafted, and I expect that to take several hours."

"Naomi, I've only got dollars - " He realized he should have exchanged his money while they were waiting at Cascade airport, but in his misery at knowing he'd never see Jim again, he'd totally forgotten.

She reached for her purse and gave him two ten pound notes. "I can cover you financially till we get to the bank here and open an account for you - I'm not saying they wouldn't exchange the money for you if you went in this morning, but it'll be easier if you actually have an account. If I'm with you I can vouch for you. And I really need to work on my story today."

Blair wasn't convinced that he would need Naomi with him to open an account, but at the same time he realized the truth of her comment that, because he was obviously American, having the say-so of a known resident would probably make things go more smoothly.

"Probably the beginning of next week," she added.

And so, with twenty pounds in his wallet, Blair set off to explore, leaving Naomi sitting at her laptop, her eyes unfocused, clearly deep in thought.

Blair spent the morning wandering around Ballater, then climbed Craighdarroch, the low hill immediately to the north of the town. After that he found a small cafe where he had coffee and an unwanted sandwich - he still had no appetite, but knew he had to eat something. He then walked around the paths on the lower slope of the hill to the north of the town - he couldn't remember its name, though he was sure he'd known it at one time. Finally he went back through the town, stopping briefly at a surprisingly large book shop, where he bought a map of the area, before heading to the cycle shop.

After a discussion on relative costs, he told the owner he'd be back, and headed back to Naomi's house - he couldn't think of it yet as 'home'. He needed to discuss this with her, because for the moment she was the one who would have to pay. She clearly had no idea of the cost of renting a cycle; it had only taken him a few seconds to realize it would be simpler, easier and much, much cheaper to buy one.

He found Naomi still sitting in front of her laptop, busily typing. She looked around as he entered, turned her attention back to the keyboard, typed a few more words, hit 'save' and swivelled her chair to face him.

"How was your day, Sweetie?" she asked.

"Well, I reminded myself of the layout of the town, went up Craighdarroch, checked out cycles to rent... and seriously? I think that it would be cheaper to actually buy one. But I can't do that without getting my money changed."

She glanced at the clock. "The bank will be shut now," she said.

He nodded. "Tomorrow will do," he said. "How have you done?"

She stretched. "I have the plot worked out, and made a start on the first chapter," she said. "I have a good feeling about this one. No, I'm not telling you anything about the plot - as I write, some details might change. Have you been thinking about what you'll write?"

"Not really. Yes, I know I'll have to do something - I don't have that much money and I can't sponge off you indefinitely - "

"Well, if you're serious about buying a bike, I'll give it to you as a present," she said.

"I am. It'll give me exercise - I can set aside two or three hours every day to go out - as well as letting me see something of the countryside round about."

And so the following morning they both went out; first to the bank, where Blair opened an account and paid in the dollars he had withdrawn from his American bank before leaving, ostensibly on holiday; and then to the cycle shop, where he selected a sturdy bike that would enable him to tackle rough tracks as well as roads.

After lunch, while Naomi returned to her writing, Blair set off on his first cycle trip. He opted for a fairly short one, to break himself in gradually; it was several years since he had last owned a bike, and he had no wish to find himself stiff in the morning. In any case, he probably should give some thought to trying to write something.

So while he cycled along the north side of the River Dee to Balmoral, and returned to Ballater along the south side, only half of his attention was on the scenery, striking though it was. The other half was considering possible plots.

Naomi had suggested that he write crime stories based on things he had seen, but even if he disguised them it wasn't impossible that someone might recognize them - he couldn't, for example, write about a killer whose reason was identity theft; oh, it might be possible to disguise the circumstances, the sequence of events, but anyone who knew the Lash case would surely recognize the inspiration for the story. Jim certainly would, should he come across the book. Okay, any writer could get inspiration from cases mentioned in the papers, but...

He couldn't write anthropology-based stories either; unless he made some deliberate and very basic mistakes anyone reading them would know that the writer was talking from experience. But archaeology? His studies had covered some archaeology, enough to let him write knowledgeably but without expertise; anything he wrote would simply have the look of a writer who had done his homework, read up a bit on the subject...

Hmmm... Have the protagonist a young archaeologist anxious to make a name for himself, who has the money to organize his own expedition? He hears a legend about a lost Aztec temple and decides to go in search of it. He gathers a small group - one of his old professors, now retired, who has spent all his savings on medical treatment for his terminally ill wife, who has now died - that would give the group an older, experienced member to add credence to the expedition. How big a group? Maybe another four... two men, two girls? Three men, one girl? That could add a bit of sexual tension, especially if two of the men were

trying to romance the girl. She could be cast either way, either not interested in either of them, having an eye to a solid career, or drawn to both, not able to make up her mind which she prefers, playing one against the other. Either way it could cause trouble as they vied for her attention. And then - yes! One of them turns up dead, the other is suspect... and the poor protagonist somehow has to resolve everything, get the survivors back to civilization without the actual killer realizing he's been identified... as well as having enough info on the temple for the protagonist to make his name. The professor and the innocent members of the team join him in his success, and they form the nucleus of a team that will go out again. That would leave things open-ended enough for a sequel, if it proved successful enough.

Yes, as a rough plot, that could work. He'd need to iron out a few details, but as a rough outline he thought it would work.

He'd have to watch it, though - to make any new members of the team the automatic villains would be too obvious. At the same time, to have the villains anyone they met would also be too obvious. No. He might manage one sequel, but after that he'd have to look for a different set-up, different characters, because there always had to be an antagonist. Or maybe... One book where the antagonist was nature? A serious earthquake, perhaps, so that the group had to make their way on foot through seriously damaged terrain back to a shattered city, and immediately be caught up in the relief effort?

Yes, the earthquake one could work too...

By the time he'd worked it all out, he was turning onto the bridge that would take him over the river and back into Ballater.

Back at the house, he put the cycle into the back porch and went inside.

Naomi was still typing industriously. She glanced up, nodded a welcome, and returned to her typing.

Blair checked the time. It was still mid-afternoon; he had gone perhaps sixteen, seventeen miles and it had taken him a little over an hour. But he had quite enjoyed the trip, and it had proved fruitful. He went to his bedroom, retrieved his laptop, hesitated, then decided that he would probably be better to work here, not in the same room as Naomi; he looked for a socket, plugged the laptop in and opened a new document.

He typed in his two basic ideas and saved the document as 'plots'. Then he opened another new document, typed in 'The Temple' as a working title, put 'by J B Burgess' under it, thought for a moment, then made a list of names and their relationship to the group and to each other. These would be his main characters. He moved the cursor back to above the list and started typing.

Although he was only cleared for half days working at his desk, Jim - while working at his desk - stretched the 'half' days to almost full days by simply not taking a lunch break. It took nearly a week before Simon challenged him - because they were out of the bullpen a lot of the time, nobody else realized the hours that their very silent colleague was putting in. To Simon, Jim simply said, "Half the day finishes at lunchtime. I haven't had lunch yet," as he glanced up from his computer.

"Are you eating at all?" Simon demanded.

Jim sighed. "Yes, but I don't have much appetite."

"You need to eat to get the energy to help your leg heal."

"I know, and I'm trying to eat, but..." He shrugged. "Like I said, I'm just not hungry."

"Missing Sandburg that much?" Simon's voice was very gentle.

"Partly. But part of it is anger, anger that's making my guts churn. Naomi... She practically abandoned him when he was a kid - if that uncle hadn't taken him, what would have happened to him? But now that he's an independent adult, she interferes with his life, then carries him off... And I find myself wondering, how long before she decides to abandon him again? Presumably she has money - some money, at least - but he has none. How long before she decides that paying his way is running away with too much of her money?"

"Jim, the kid is resourceful - "

"I know, he'd find some way to manage. I'm thinking though, what would it do to him emotionally? She's carried him off, persuaded him that it's the best thing he can do for me, for my safety. Somehow she's persuaded him that she wants him along. But when she tires of him, of having him around - and she will, Simon; how long does she ever stay when she visits? What will that do to him?"

"He'd probably go to that uncle of his - "

"Unless she's persuaded him that his uncle doesn't want him either. I wouldn't put it past her, Simon. For the moment at least she's taken it into her head that she wants him, and that being so, she's going to discourage him from wanting anyone else, from thinking that anyone else wants him. She claims to love him, but I don't think she has it in her to love anyone. According to Blair, she doesn't even know who his father is. Says a lot for the way she lived when she was young, doesn't it? If she slept with several men, and close enough together that she doesn't know which of them left her pregnant, did she love any of them, or was she just using them?"

"She's no fool, Simon. She knows what she's doing. And what she does is whatever suits her, whatever she sees is to her advantage. And when it stops being to her advantage... she abandons it. That showed up over and over in Blair's journals. She turned up in the summer, took Blair on holiday for three or four weeks, then when she got tired of playing Mom she tossed him back to his uncle. And Blair was so... so damned *grateful* for the crumbs of

affection he felt she gave him during those few weeks. Once he went to Rainier... Once he went to Rainier he didn't even see that much of her. You know what she's been like these last few years - the wind blows her in, she stays for a day or two then the wind blows her away again. He gets the occasional letter, but there's never a return address; he can't write her back. It's as if she isn't really interested in him, in what he's doing, but wants to keep him interested in her.

"My dad didn't have much idea how to bring up kids, but at least he was *there!*"

"And Blair's uncle was there for him. Though... does he have much contact with his uncle now?"

"I don't know. He might write or email, but he never visits, and Blair... the only relative Blair ever mentions apart from Naomi is his cousin Robert. He's mentioned other cousins who live in Fort Worth, and an uncle who drove big rigs, taught him how to drive them. He's never mentioned one who brought him up, and I know from the journal that he wasn't the uncle who drove the rigs. I only know about him from Blair's journal... so now I'm wondering, is he dead? Because if he is... If he is, Blair doesn't have any family who cares - really cares - about him. Apart from us. We might not be blood kin, but he's part of the MC family."

They looked at each other.

Finally, Simon shook his head. "And for now there's nothing we can do."

"There is," Jim said. "I can give Blair at least some of his life back - "

"If he comes back."

"I'm thinking of holding my own press conference. Owning up to the sentinel thing, but underplaying it a bit. Admitting to good eyesight and hearing, but nothing too dramatic - if I did admit the whole truth, how long do you think I'd survive? But the crime bosses aren't going to worry too much about a cop with good night vision and long sight, or ears that can hear a conversation from twenty yards away. It would... in a way it would be confirming Blair's press conference, but changing 'fraudulent' to 'exaggerating'."

"I see that, but unless Blair comes back he isn't going to know, is he? And if you did, how would the DA react? Or crooks claiming you obtained evidence illegally?"

"After the Tommy Juno affair - when we just weren't thinking - we always made absolutely sure that any evidence I presented was something that would hold up in court."

"All right, I'll accept that," Simon said. "But - " more briskly - "you've been putting in a lot more than the half days you're cleared to work, and 'I haven't stopped yet for lunch' is cheating . Frankly, you look like death warmed over. Go home! And eat!"

"Yes, sir."

"And sound more enthusiastic about it!"

Simon watched as Jim shut down his computer, shrugged into his jacket and left the bullpen, then he turned and went back into his office. He understood exactly what was bothering Jim... and he had no idea what to do about it.

Having spent much of the evening thinking about it, however, Jim decided to leave things more or less as they stood. He did arrange a meeting with the Chief of Police and DA Beverly Sanchez, and admitted the truth to them. Chief Warren was surprised, but agreed that keeping quiet about it was probably the most sensible thing to do; as long as he made sure none of the evidence he presented was the result of his 'super senses'. "That's why Banks wanted Sandburg on board?"

"Yes. Without him, I can be overwhelmed by the sheer input of sensory stimuli," Jim explained. "But it isn't just that - he has a way of seeing outside the box, of putting several apparently unassociated facts together and coming up with a logical answer."

Bev Sanchez simply nodded. "I remember the Juno case," she said.

"We learned from that," Jim said.

"Yes. But there were a few things I wondered about - so what you're saying doesn't surprise me. And when it comes down to it - I'm sure we can find a way to keep his claim of 'fraud' from affecting any evidence he might give."

Even after Jim was cleared to work full time he was still restricted to desk work. "Yes, I know you want to get back to normal working," the doctor told him, "but your injury was worse than you initially claimed - 'just a scratch', you said, didn't you. Well, it was a lot more than 'just a scratch', and if you overdo things now, you'll be looking at a permanent limp, not a temporary one. Give it another two weeks at least; make an appointment for two weeks from today, and we'll see how it is then."

So an unhappy Jim Ellison went back to the PD, reported to Simon, and was assigned to continuing to go over cold cases.

He dug out enough overlooked evidence to clear two of the cases - the prime suspect in one case was dead, killed in a shoot-out with a rival gang, the other was in prison and never going to breathe free air again; under the circumstances, going to the expense of a trial would be a waste of money, and there was nobody for whom it would give closure; the victim had no known relatives. The rest of the cases he looked at remained uncompromisingly cold; he couldn't even claim to be doing any good whatsoever. Though he suspected that if Blair had been there, between them they could have made progress on a few more.

On the fourth morning of his return to 'full' duty, he was alone in the bullpen; unusually, everyone else was out - normally there would have been one or two of the others reading over evidence, catching up on reports...

"Ellison!"

He glanced towards Simon's door - why would the Captain be calling for him?

He tried not to limp as he crossed to Simon's office. "You called, sir?"

"I know you're only cleared for desk duty," Simon said, "but there's nobody else available. Why we got this instead of Homicide I don't know... There's been a body found - just bones. I want you to go with Dan Wolfe and see what you make of the scene - I've asked him to wait for you, so you'd better hurry. He'll be in the garage."

"On my way!" If the body was 'just bones' it was probably fairly old - old enough for Simon to justify giving the case to him as one that was probably 'cold'?

In the garage, Jim found Dan and his team waiting. "Hi, Dan."

"Glad to have you with us," Dan replied, and Jim knew instantly that the medical examiner hadn't been fooled for a moment by Blair's claim of 'fraud'.

"What do we have?" Jim asked as they set off. "All Simon said was 'bones'."

"That's as much as I know, but it says to me someone who's been dead a minimum of six months, more likely longer. There are so many variables to take onto consideration..."

They went first towards the sea, then along the shore road for some distance, finally stopping behind a police car that was parked at the side of the road. Dan led the way towards the water. Two policemen were standing a few yards from a jumble of rocks, the younger one looking a little shaken.

Jim recognized them. "What have we got, Howard?"

"Guy was walking his dog along the beach a couple of hours ago," Jeff Howard, the older of the two, replied. "Dog went over to the rocks there, wouldn't come away when he called, so the owner went over and found a skeleton, partially uncovered. He phoned in right away, and we came out. We got a statement from him, then let him take his dog home - but I don't think he can give us anything more than he already did."

"Thanks. I'll have to speak to him myself, but I think you're probably right."

"At least this one is just bones," Howard said. "The ones I feel really sorry for are the folk who find a half-decomposed body."

Jim nodded. "I've had to deal with one or two of those over the years. Bad enough for us; lot worse for whoever finds them." He turned and followed Dan, who was already nearly at the spot Howard had indicated.

The body - the skeleton - was partly buried under rocks and some earth. Most of what was showing was the back and lower rib cage. There were still some scraps of material partly covering the bones. Jim looked around, noting a big boulder that looked as if it had been on top of the other rocks, and rolled off.

"Remember that storm two nights ago?" Dan asked.

"Yes - the force of water at high tide probably moved that boulder - a wave must have hit it at just the right angle," Jim agreed. He studied the rocks, then looked at the thirty-foot-high bank above them. "From the look of that slope..." He nodded towards it. "I think whoever this was was just very, very unlucky - walking along the beach when there was a landslide, and he was caught under it. Possibly a stone hit him on the head, knocked him out, and that was that - covered by soil and rock, he suffocated. And if nobody knew he was walking on the beach, even when he was missed nobody would think that he was under that fresh pile of rocks. I think I need to check on missing persons from quite a few years back," he went on. "This fall isn't at all recent - the vegetation has had time to cover the exposed ground and consolidate itself. Possibly some of the original fall has been washed away by storms since it happened, and this last one finally uncovered at least enough of him that he could be found."

Dan examined the rocks and soil covering the cadaver's head and shoulders, and legs. "Yes - but I think only the worst storms, coinciding with high tide, would have washed anything away. It's fairly high up the beach." He turned to his assistants. "Okay, guys, we can get him out. Remember to watch out for any sign of insect activity, though I don't think we'll find any."

As they uncovered the victim's upper body, Jim saw the glint of something and said, "Wait!" He pulled on gloves and reached carefully down, and retrieved a small bone with two rings on it, one a plain gold band, the other with a diamond still set in it. "It was a woman," he said unnecessarily as Dan gave him an evidence bag. He put the rings carefully into it.

With the upper part of the skeleton uncovered, they turned their attention to the legs, and carefully disinterred them. As they lifted the bones out, Jim's attention was drawn to something dark; he reached down and picked up a partly rotted wallet. "We might just have an identification in here," he said and opened it carefully.

There was an American Express card in it as well as the remains of some paper money and a few coins. Jim looked at the card carefully. The printing on it was faded, but he could just make out the name 'Leah' and an expiry date of 1964. "She died in the sixties," he said.

Dan made a face. "So for thirty years her family hasn't known what happened to her. God, that's sad!"

"At least they can get closure now... if we can find them."

Back at the station, Dan and his assistants took Leah's remains to the morgue, while Jim made his way back to the bullpen. As he entered, he hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should start off by contacting Missing Persons so that he could give Simon a more complete report, then, knowing that Simon would prefer to get an initial, albeit incomplete, report, went over to Simon's office, knocked and went in.

"Jim. How did it go?"

"We have the victim of what seems to have been an accident in the early sixties," Jim reported. "We're pretty sure she was caught in a rock fall. The storm two days ago washed one of the bigger rocks off her, leaving part of her body visible - enough that the man who found her recognized the skeleton as human rather than animal. It should be fairly easy to identify her - there was a wallet with a credit card, and from it we also have a first name - so if she was reported missing at the time, Missing Persons should have a record of her. I'll start there."

Simon nodded his agreement. "If only they were all that easy," he commented.

Jim went back to his desk, and phoned Missing Persons.

"Missing Persons, Lewis Cox speaking."

"Jim Ellison, Major Crime. We're dealing with a body that's approximately thirty years old - a married woman, first name Leah, who died prior to 1964 - I'd say probably between 1962 and '64. We were wondering if she was reported as missing - it seems to have been an accidental death, rather than murder."

"Okay, I'll check and get back to you."

Jim turned his attention back to the Amex card, straining to the point of zoning out as he tried to read the second name. He did manage to make out most of the number, though, and made a note of it, knowing that he might have to approach American Express for an identification.

He hadn't been at work long on the following day when his phone rang. "Ellison."

"Lewis Cox, Detective. We've got your victim - reported missing 8th March 1963. The name is Leah Sandburg - "

"Sandburg?"

"Yes. Reported missing by her husband Aaron. The home address was 2183 Seattle Road."

Jim scribbled it down. "Thanks."

He put the phone down. Sandburg? No. Had to be a coincidence. Blair's family came from Fort Worth.

After more than thirty years there was no great urgency in tracking down the family; however, he should visit 2183 Seattle Road immediately, and hope someone was at home. But first, Simon, then Dan.

He crossed to Simon's office, knocked and went in, remaining beside the door. "Our Leah Doe has been identified," he said. "Her husband did report her missing. The name is Sandburg."

"Sa - " Simon looked stunned.

"I think it's coincidence. There was no mention of Cascade in Blair's journals until he started at Rainier - he grew up in Fort Worth. Anyway, I've got an address - the family might still be there, even after thirty years."

"Yes - go and check."

Jim walked out. He went to the garage by way of the morgue, finding Dan checking the skeleton.

"Were we right? This was an accident?" he asked.

"The injuries to the bones are all consistent with burial caused by a rockfall," Dan said.

"We have an identification - the name's Sandburg."

Dan drew in a sharp breath. "Any chance she's related to Blair?"

"I think it unlikely - Blair didn't come to Cascade till he was sixteen, and his mother has never given me any reason to think that she'd ever been here before that. Anyway, I'm on my way to see if the family is still at the address Missing Persons has."

He left, went on to the garage, and drove out heading for Seattle Road.

2183 was a fairly big house - slightly larger than the Ellison family home, but the area had the look of being a little less affluent than it might once have been. There was a fairly small car sitting in the drive; he parked on the road, walked up to the door and rang the bell.

The woman who opened the door looked to be about fifty. He showed her his badge, and asked, "Are you the home owner, Ms - ?"

"Stockwell. My husband is the actual owner," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm looking for Aaron Sandburg, who lived here in 1963," Jim said.

"Oh." She shook her head. "I'm sorry; we bought the house nearly ten years ago, but the people we bought it from were called Bryce. I think they moved to Canada, but I don't have an address for them."

"Thank you. We knew it was a pretty long shot, finding Mr Sandburg here after so long. Do you know... Did any of your neighbors live here in the 1960s?"

"I'm not sure. I think Andy Gormley might have done - he said once that he's lived here all his life, but he's younger than I am, so he would just have been a child in 1963 - he was probably just seven or eight."

"Maybe just old enough to remember..." Jim said thoughtfully. "Which is his house?"

"Number 2189. He'll probably be in - he works from home."

"Thank you again." Turning, he walked back down the drive and along the road to 2189.

The woman who answered the door of 2189 was probably, he thought, still on the right side of forty. Once again he showed his badge. "Is Mr Gormley in?"

"Yes... He's not in trouble, is he?"

"No. I was hoping that he might know something about a family that lived here thirty years ago."

"Oh." She sounded startled. "Come in."

She took him to a room that was laid out as an office. "Andy, Detective - " She glanced helplessly at Jim.

"Detective Ellison," Jim said. "I won't keep you long, sir. I understand that you've lived here all your life?"

"Yes; I'm an only child and inherited the house when my parents died. I like it here, so I've never thought of moving away."

"We're actually looking for Mr Sandburg who lived at number 2183 in 1963 - or his family."

"I didn't know them well - the boys were all a good bit older than me, and even Naomi was a couple of years older."

"Naomi?" Jim whispered.

"But I know they were all shattered when their mother disappeared."

"What happened to them, do you know?"

"Naomi had a baby six or seven years later. Most of the family moved away... somewhere about 1970, I think. No, it must have been '71 - it was summer, and the baby was walking quite well by the time they left. He'd have been walking in the summer of '70, but not very steadily. But I don't know where they went. David - the oldest of the family - stayed on for a year or two, then he moved away as well."

Oh, God, Blair! Jim thought. "Fort Worth," he said. "They went to Fort Worth. We'll have to extend our search for the family to there."

"How do you know that?" Gormley asked.

"Blair, Naomi's son... " he began.



"Wait a minute... Blair Sandburg. He was on TV a few weeks ago - "

"Yes."

"I didn't make the connection... "

"He's my best friend. I knew he had family in Fort Worth, I didn't know about the Cascade connection until now - but although he came here to attend university, I don't think he knew his family had originally lived here. He left Cascade a few days after he was on TV, and we don't know where he went. The thing is, Mr Gormley, Mrs Sandburg's body was found early yesterday morning. She'd been walking on the beach, and was caught in a rockfall. Over the years storms washed away some of the earth and rocks covering her body, and yesterday someone walking his dog found her, partially uncovered. He knew enough to identify the bones as human, and we got a positive identification this morning. Obviously we want to let the family know. Even after more than thirty years, it will still give them closure."

Jim went back to the station, thinking hard.

Leah Sandburg had had an Amex card. Presumably her husband did too. American Express should be able to give them an address in Fort Worth...

Which after some hours American Express did, though like the Cascade address Jim suspected it probably wouldn't be a current one, especially since, according to the company, Aaron Sandburg had died in 1975, and nobody at that address had subsequently taken out an Amex card.

Of course, there could be several reasons for that. By the mid-seventies, credit cards were becoming a lot more common, with not all providers looking for payment in full every month.

Jim waited until the evening before he phoned the number Amex gave them, to make sure that there would be someone in the house.

"Hello." It was a male voice.

"Hello," Jim replied. "I'm Detective Jim Ellison, Cascade PD. I'm hoping you can help me. I'm looking for a David Sandburg, whose parents were Aaron and Leah Sandburg, originally from Cascade, and yours is the last known address we've been able to find."

"I'm David Sandburg."

"You have a sister Naomi who has a son called Blair?"

"Yes. Are they all right?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Jim said wryly. "The whole story is somewhat complicated, but... Blair is my very good friend; he worked with the PD here as a consultant for the last four years - "

"He's mentioned working with 'Jim' and renting a room from him - that's you?"

"Yes. However, he went off with Naomi on holiday a few weeks ago, and I haven't heard from him, not even a postcard to say 'Having a great time'. But he left me a letter, and - well - it made me wonder if she was actually going to let him come back to Cascade. Now if that's his choice, fair enough, but if she's trying to coerce him because she didn't really like his involvement with the Cascade police... "

"I do know roughly where they might be," David said slowly.

"I'd be grateful for any information you can give me. But first - I have something to tell you. Your father reported your mother to the Cascade police as a missing person in March 1963."

"Yes. She just... disappeared. Went out one day and never came back."

"I'm sorry to tell you - her body was found earlier this week. It appears that she had been walking on the beach not too far from your home, and there was a rock fall; she was caught

under it. A storm a few days ago washed enough of the debris off her body for someone to see and report it."

There was a very brief silence, then, "It was definitely an accident?"

"Yes. Our medical examiner has no doubts about that. As the oldest son, if you want to claim her body... "

"Yes," David said. "I... want her buried beside my father."

"Her body can be released as soon as you contact a funeral director to collect it."

"Thank you."

"Now, Naomi and Blair?"

"After our father died... His will left the house and a little money to me and split the rest of the money between Naomi and our two brothers. With Dad gone, though, Naomi couldn't settle, and decided to use the money he left her to do some travelling. She left Blair with me so that his schooling wouldn't be interrupted.

"It could be she invested some of the money really well, but she managed to stretch it far beyond anything I would have expected, and ten or eleven years ago she bought a house in a small town in Scotland - she'd been to it several times on holiday and loved the place. The town is called Ballater; I know that much, but she never gave me the actual address, so I've no way of getting in touch with her. I hear from her occasionally - sometimes she's sent me a letter to send on to Blair - but I can't contact her."

"I could try contacting the local police," Jim said slowly. "As a cop here, I have reason to look for her because your mother's body has just been found."

"Yes... " David hesitated for a moment, then said, "You've met Naomi."

"Yes."

"Can I ask... what do you think of her?"

"Ivvve... " Jim hesitated. "I've never been quite able to make up my mind," he finally admitted.

"Don't judge her too harshly, Detective. She changed after Mom disappeared. She took it very hard. I don't say it was easy for any of us, but it seemed to hit her worst. She was ten," David went on. "I was nineteen. Our brothers were sixteen and seventeen - we were old enough to... I don't say accept, but we'd passed the stage of dependency. At ten, Naomi was still very dependent on Mom. I'd have expected her to become... well, clingy, but she didn't; she became almost frighteningly self-sufficient."

"It has always seemed to me - since I first met her - that she doesn't really care deeply for anyone but herself," Jim said slowly. "Maybe she didn't dare let herself care too deeply in

case she was - well, deserted again? She goes through the motions of loving Blair, but in the four years I've known him, he never knew where she was; how to get in touch with her. She turned up once or twice over the years, stayed a day or two, then disappeared again. This carrying him off... it seemed out of character, except that she's never made any bones about distrusting the police."

"I think she blamed the police for not finding Mom... "

"That's possible," Jim agreed.

"Though... we all thought she'd just walked out. That she'd... fallen out of love with us, and decided to leave. We never thought that she might be... might be dead."

"That happens," Jim agreed, "but usually there are some signs that the family might not consciously register at the time, but recognize in hindsight." He hesitated for a moment, then went on, "What about Blair's father? She's never told Blair who he was."

"She never told us either. Just that he'd walked away when she told him she was pregnant. We hadn't even known she had a boyfriend. Hell, she was just sixteen!"

"So basically he abandoned her? That wouldn't have helped her trust issues."

"My father, my brothers and I - we all supported her," David protested.

"I don't doubt it, especially since you took responsibility for Blair once Naomi decided to move on, and I know your brothers helped as well. But presumably she loved the man. Deserted by her mother, then by her boyfriend... Yes, that explains quite a lot."

Next morning Jim went back in to see Simon and repeated what David Sandburg had told him.

"So we have a possible town, but not an actual address," Simon said.

"Yes. I don't want to ask the local police to track her down, tell her to get in contact with us - she's more likely to move away, go somewhere else, taking Blair with her. So I was thinking... I'm not really accomplishing much with the cold cases, so if I were to take some of the vacation time I'm due, go to this Ballater place, have a word with the police there, cop to cop, explain the situation, get the actual address and go myself to see her... "

"Just don't overdo things with that leg of yours. Yes, I know what the doctor told you - do you really want to end up with a permanent limp?"

"No," Jim muttered.

"How much vacation time do you have?"

"I'm not sure," Jim admitted. "I know I've lost quite a bit because I haven't been taking it - "

"All right. Take a month. But I want to see you back here four weeks from today."

Jim nodded, and as he turned to leave, Simon added, "And Jim - keep me informed."

"Will do. Thanks, Simon."

Half an hour with the computer gave him the information he needed to get to Ballater.

Unlike Naomi, he chose to fly to Aberdeen (changing planes in Newark and Glasgow), caught the shuttle from the airport to the town, and from there he took a bus to Ballater. He spent the hours going over and over in his mind what he wanted to say - to the Ballater police, to Blair, to Naomi.

When he got off the bus, he checked the map he had printed out, and followed it to the police station.

Outside it, he paused for a moment, took a deep breath, then went inside.

"Yes, sir? Can I help you?"

He pulled his badge from his pocket and showed it to the young policeman manning the desk. "Jim Ellison," he said.

"Ah - we were expecting you."

"You were?"

"A Captain Banks phoned. He said you needed to speak to one of our residents, Miss Sandburg, but didn't know her actual address; and would we please leave it to you to explain to her just why you wanted her."

"Did he tell you why?"

"He said something about her mother?"

"Yes. Disappeared over thirty years ago. We know now what happened. Because I know Naomi - though not well - we felt that it would be best if I came to see her, tell her face to face." He hesitated for a moment. "Can you tell me - does she have a visitor just now?"

"Yes, her nephew Blair."

Nephew, Jim thought. Weird - for thirty years she makes no bones about him being her son, even in an era where having a child without being married was something of a disgrace, but here, now, she claims him as her nephew? "It's really Blair I know well."

"He seems to have had a hard time, what with his mother dying recently. He's friendly enough when you see him, but you can see that he's not really happy."

"Yes - before Naomi brought him here he'd had a pretty miserable few days." And wasn't that the truth! "So - the address?" He put his map down on the desk.

The young officer looked at it and pointed out the house - not far away... but then nowhere in Ballater was particularly far from anywhere else.

"Thank you. If there's ever anything I can do for you - " Jim murmured, meaning it.

"Just give Miss Sandburg some good news, and see if you can cheer Blair up."

Jim smiled. "Well, it's not totally good news, but it's... possibly comforting. And yes, I think I can cheer Blair up."

Blair had developed the habit of cycling somewhere in the morning, then writing in the afternoon and evening. After the first day, Naomi had persuaded him to join her in the living room, which doubled as a study for her - "It's not so bad in the summer, but in the winter it means I only really have to heat the one room," she said. "I just keep the rest heated enough so that things won't freeze. It can get pretty cold here, though not nearly as cold as it does a few miles west, in Braemar."

"Will you be able to concentrate properly with someone else in the room?" Blair asked.

"You'll be writing too," she pointed out. "Will I disturb you?"

"No, but I'm sorta used to working with someone else in the same room."

"Once I'm really concentrating and the words are flowing, I'm not really aware of anything else," Naomi told him.

So they worked in the same room. And although he went out every morning, Blair's writing hours were much the same as Naomi's, because he worked later into the evening. Though he suspected that she had to spend time in the mornings, when he was out, meditating, because he never saw her meditating at any other time. Of course, as far as he knew, she could meditate in her bedroom before she actually went to bed...

He still hadn't realized that meditation, for Naomi, was part of her public persona, an affectation adopted to show her 'devotion' to the mystical.

He had no idea how well Naomi's story was going, but after two weeks of steady work on it his own was progressing well, though he was having to discipline himself to not make Professor Sheldon the protagonist rather than Allan Renfrew. He had finally settled on having Elma Larkin, his sole female character, a dedicated career woman who had no interest whatsoever in the romantic machinations of Phil Grant or Mike Waters. On consideration, he had made his sixth character, Tom Prince, a seriously closeted, in denial, gay man who refused to accept that he was secretly in love with Allan, telling himself - and everyone else - that it was respect for the man's abilities.

The expedition was going well, they had found the lost temple and begun excavating; time now to up the ante by killing either Phil or Mike...

They were interrupted by the doorbell.

Now that was unusual. Tempted for a moment to leave it unanswered, so that whoever it was would think they were out and go away, Blair sighed and stood. "I'll get it."

"It's probably not important," Naomi said. "We sometimes get travelling salesmen - "

"If that's all it is, I'll soon get rid of him," Blair said as he headed for the door.

He opened the front door, to see -

"Jim?" There was no way he could disguise the joy he felt at seeing his friend so unexpectedly.

"Hello, Blair." Jim grinned. "God, it's good to see you! Are you all right?"

"Yes... But Jim, how...?"

"Slightly complicated story, but it'll be soon told. Is... er... your 'aunt' in?"

"Oh - you know about that?"

"Just as well the guy at the police station mentioned 'nephew' before I said 'son'," Jim told him. "I'm actually here - officially - to see Naomi."

Blair stiffened. "She's not in trouble, is she?"

"No. This is something that I think - I hope - she'll find comforting. Your Uncle David did. Now, can I come in?"

"Oh..." Blair moved to the side to let Jim pass him, and closed the door. He led the way to the living room. "We've got a visitor, Naomi."

Naomi looked round, and Jim could see her stiffen. Although he felt a little guilty about it, part of him was pleased to see that his presence so clearly worried her. "Jim? How did you find us?"

"David," Jim said. "He could only tell me Ballater, but it was enough. Naomi, I've got news for you. Something that you probably never expected to hear. "

"News? What news could you possibly have?"

Although he hadn't been offered a seat, Jim sank into one.

"Back in 1963... Your mother didn't desert you, Naomi. She was killed in an accident. Her body was found just a few days after you left Cascade. I'm sorry."

Naomi's jaw dropped. "An accident? How...?"

Jim explained quietly, adding, "Our medical examiner is quite sure it was just a very unfortunate accident. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I've let David know - "

"How did you find him?"

"There was a wallet with a credit card in it lying under her body. The company gave us the last known address for your father - "

"And of course David still lives there."

"Yes. He's arranging to have your mother's body buried beside your father, and I know he'd be very happy if you were there."

"All this time... all this time I thought she deserted us... " There was a catch in Naomi's voice as it trailed off.

"I know a child can feel that someone who dies has abandoned them, but it isn't deliberate. I'm quite sure she didn't want to leave you." Jim's voice was very gentle.

"An adult can feel that too," Blair said quietly. "You always felt that your men in Peru abandoned you, didn't you."

Jim nodded. "Which is why I can understand how Naomi feels." Jim looked at her. "Did you blame the police for not finding her? Is that why you hate the police so much?"

"No." She was silent for a moment, then said, "At the time, I did blame them, I suppose, but that's not why. For a little more than a year after I started travelling, I did get involved with protests, and often the police were less than gentle when they broke up demonstrations. In hindsight... I can see that they were sometimes quite seriously provoked by us, but at the time... We were so convinced that we were right, and I saw some of my fellow protesters quite badly hurt. I still believe in most of the things we protested about, but I see now that at least some of the time we went about it the wrong way. And I still think the police were often unnecessarily brutal in the way they handled us.

"But... " She hesitated for a long moment. "That isn't all." She took a deep breath and looked at Blair. "I'm sorry, Sweetie," she said. "I always told you I didn't know who your father was. Truth is, I do know, sort of - though I don't know if the name he gave me was his real name. I suspect it wasn't. He was handsome, charming... it was flattering, having someone like that paying attention to me, though I should have been suspicious when he never picked me up at home or took me home. Though Dad wouldn't have been happy about it, and I knew that - I was sixteen, Stewart was at least twenty years older. I don't say I was in love; but I was seriously in lust.

"When I realized I was pregnant, I didn't actually expect him to marry me, though I did think he would be happy about it. Instead, he yelled at me for not being careful, that he wasn't sacrificing his marriage over it... and walked away. I could have tried to make trouble for him, but as I said, I don't know that the name he gave me - Stewart Langley - was his real

name. And... he told me he was a cop, but that could have been a lie, too. But it didn't encourage me to trust the cops, and then later, when I was travelling... well, that confirmed my distrust of them." She looked at Jim. "I... did develop an unwilling respect for you, Captain Banks and the rest of your colleagues... but I still kept waiting for the other shoe to fall."

"Easy enough to check if there was a Stewart Langley in the CPD in 1968," Jim said, "though I suspect you're right; if he was already married, he was unlikely to have given you his real name, and he could have said he was a cop just to get you to trust him. You haven't really trusted anyone since then, have you?"

"Outside the family... no. I've had boyfriends since, but only as long as they kept it casual. The moment they seemed to be getting serious, to be looking for me to trust them enough to get married, I was out of there. That's partly why... I was sure Blair was making a mistake in trusting you... but you've gone to the trouble of coming here to tell me about Mom... "

"There's something else," Jim said quietly. He reached into his pocket, took out a small bag and gave it to her. "I've spoken to David a couple of times, and he agrees that if you want them you should have these."

She opened the bag and took two rings from it. "This... this is Mom's engagement ring," she whispered. "And her wedding ring?"

"There was a wallet as well, which is still at the PD," Jim said, "because apart from a few coins the money in it isn't retrievable, and the leather of the wallet is badly damaged; but if you or David wants it, it's there for you. Apart from Dan's check-up of her body, this is another reason we know it was an accident - if someone had attacked her, they'd have taken her rings and wallet."

"Yes," Naomi whispered. "I think... David hasn't had her buried yet?"

"As I said, he wants you there."

"Then... Unless he wants the wedding ring, I'd like it to be buried with her. But I'll keep the other one." She slipped it onto the fourth finger of her right hand.

Jim gave her a few seconds to regain an emotional control that he could see was fragile, then he went on. "If you want, I can check the PD records for Stewart Langley - "

Naomi shook her head. "You can if you want, but I'm quite sure you won't find him. In hindsight... I don't think I've thought clearly about him in thirty years, but telling you... both of you... about him has made me see that he was nothing but a charming con man. I'm probably not the only teenager he seduced and left pregnant."

"You could well be right," Jim agreed. Again he allowed a few seconds to pass before he went on. "Now that that's cleared up... will you let Blair come back, go to the Academy and become a cop?"

"I... wasn't actually stopping him, but I do have to admit... " She faltered.

"You found the one argument that would keep him from coming back to Cascade?"

"And it's still valid," Blair, who had been sitting quietly trying to absorb everything, said unhappily.

"Well, as to that... I came clean to Chief Warren and Bev Sanchez," Jim said. "They're both sure that it won't be a problem."

"They are?" Blair suddenly looked more hopeful. "It won't?"

"They are. Will you come back, Chief?"

"I never really wanted to leave - apart from having a few extra days with Naomi," Blair said.

"Okay." Jim grinned at them. "We have one or two phone calls to make. One, to David to let him know you'll be at the funeral - "

"I think I'd like to be there too," Blair said. "I'd like to see Uncle David again - I've been in touch, but I haven't actually seen him since Uncle Peter's funeral - "

"Peter?" Naomi said, sounding shaken.

"Didn't you know?" Blair asked. "I knew you weren't at the funeral, of course, but... "

Naomi shook her head. "I've written to David a few times, but I never actually gave him my address, so he couldn't write to me. So I haven't heard from any of them since you went to Rainier," she said. "What... what happened?"

"Cancer," Blair said. "Eight years ago. He went very quickly after it was finally diagnosed." He hesitated, then added, "Uncle Tom is going blind. He can still see, but he's registered blind."

"But David is all right? And Marta? And - "

"Yes," Blair said. "Everyone else is fine."

Again Jim gave her a minute to 'process' that, before he went on. "We'll also need to phone Simon to let him know you're coming back, Chief. And then book tickets for us to get... well, initially to Fort Worth. We can worry about Fort Worth to Cascade after the funeral."

"Normally I'd fly from Glasgow," Naomi said, "but this time... it seems to make more sense to fly from Aberdeen."

Jim phoned the airport first. The earliest they could get a flight was two days later. When Jim asked about a hotel, Naomi shook her head. "There are plenty of good ones, but of course you will stay here," she said. "It's not big, but there is another bedroom." Then he

phoned David to tell him when they expected to arrive, before passing the phone to Naomi, and quietly urging Blair out of the room to let her talk to her brother in private.

Outside, Blair said softly, "Does it sound too weird to say it seems strange to be talking about going to the funeral of someone who died thirty years ago, and who has actually been buried that long?"

Jim gave a wry smile. "I know what you mean. But this will be laying her to rest, and for Naomi and your uncles, having her beside their father will mean a lot."

"Yes... You know, I never realized just how much bitterness Naomi was carrying..."

"I think David knew, he just didn't know what to do about it," Jim said. "Though I don't think he knew any details about the man who - well - "

"Left Naomi pregnant and didn't want to know," Blair said. There was an unusual note in his voice, and Jim knew instantly what he had only suspected before - how much Blair's fatherless state had bothered him. He had undoubtedly been prepared to let it go while he believed it possible that his unknown father hadn't known he'd left Naomi pregnant; to hear that the man knew and hadn't wanted to know hit him hard.

"And Chief - the man's an idiot. He never knew how brilliant a son he had."

Blair looked at him, and smiled tremulously. "You think so?"

"I know so," Jim said. They looked at each other and then, wordlessly, they took the step that separated them and threw their arms around each other.

"God, it's good to see you!" Blair whispered.

"Don't ever leave me again, Chief," Jim murmured. "Please."

Blair raised his head from where it rested against Jim's shoulder, and smiled.

By prearrangement, when they reached Fort Worth they made their own way to David's house. Naomi in particular hadn't wanted her first meeting with her brother in fourteen years to be in public.

There, David first greeted Blair with a welcoming hug before turning to his sister. "It's good to see you, Naomi," he said quietly, holding his hands out. She looked at him, burst into tears and threw herself into his arms.

Jim and Blair glanced at each other, and Jim nodded towards the door. They slipped quietly out. "Give them a few minutes," Jim said softly.

"I should find Aunt Marta," Blair murmured. "I think... she'll probably be in the kitchen."

She was. "Hello, Aunt Marta," Blair said, with none of the open affection he had shown his uncle. "You're looking well. This is my friend Jim Ellison."

"Hello, Mrs Sandburg," Jim said. "Nice to meet you... You probably don't realize it, but I owe you a massive debt."

"You do?" she asked.

"Well, you and your husband. I understand that the two of you took care of Blair while he was still a child - and a lot of that would have fallen on your shoulders. It can't have been easy looking after a child who knew he'd been pretty well abandoned by his mother, and you did a marvellous job. Blair's told me how happy he was here." *With Uncle David*, he added mentally.

"I have to admit I wasn't best pleased when David agreed to take Blair," Marta said, "but it wasn't Blair's fault." She licked her lips as she looked at Blair. "I'm afraid it always annoyed me, how pleased you were to see Naomi when she turned up to give you two or three weeks' attention in the summer."

"A neglected child is often surprisingly devoted to the parent who neglects him," Jim said, quoting Simon. "And when she came, it was to take him on holiday, give him a treat. You were the one who saw to his everyday needs, cared for him when he was ill, had to discipline him any time he was naughty."

"And Jim's right," Blair said. "You did a really good job. I'm afraid I wasn't as grateful as I should have been."

She looked at him for a moment, then smiled. "Blair... come and give your auntie a hug!"

Two of David's children - Nathan and Gail - still lived at home. That night, the seven of them sat late into the night talking about Leah Sandburg - being older, David had more memories of her than Naomi. It was, in a way, a healing time for both David and Naomi, and a learning experience for their children who, for the first time, were hearing about their grandmother.

Four days later, David's other son Phillip, and Tom and his wife and children, joined them, as well as Peter's son Barry, for a very low-key funeral. David had agreed with Naomi, that Leah's wedding ring should be buried with her. After the funeral, they all went back to David's house for a meal, then Tom and his family, and Barry, went home; Phillip had decided to stay overnight.

Blair enjoyed meeting his cousins again - he was just sorry that Peter's other children had decided not to make an appearance, though he supposed it wasn't surprising - why would they be interested in attending the funeral of a grandmother who died before they were born, though they might have turned up if their father had still been alive; and he did see Robert occasionally - very occasionally.

Naomi, Blair and Jim stayed at Fort Worth for another five days before Blair and Jim headed back to Cascade; Naomi had decided to stay on for a little longer. The night before they left, Naomi made a point of seeing Blair, briefly, on his own.

"You are going to finish your story for Sid, aren't you?"

Blair looked at her. "I think I probably will, though I may not do another one," he said.

"Blair, you really should consider it, even if you think of it as a paying hobby," Naomi said.

"If this first one does well - and I'm sure it will - Sid will probably offer you a contract for several books - maybe three or five - he couldn't do that before he sees how well the first one does. You don't have to produce one a year. Even if you took ten years to do them all, he's not likely to worry, just as long as you do them. A lot of writers, even well-known ones, do it part-time and hold down a full-time job as well."

"I'll think about it," he said, and Naomi, hearing someone coming, left it at that.

On their return to Cascade, Jim persuaded Blair to accompany him to the PD; and while the other Major Crime detectives were clustered around him asking where he'd been on holiday - only Simon had known he mightn't come back - what he'd seen, and so on, Jim slipped off to visit Personnel.

When he went in he was glad to see that Vera wasn't on duty. She had never quite forgiven him his comment of four years earlier regarding her perfume, and while remaining professional in her attitude towards him, would not be inclined to do him any favors. It was a younger clerk, who smiled a welcome. "What can I do for you?"

"How easy will it be to check personnel records for 1968?" he asked.

She turned to the computer and typed something in, then shook her head. "We've been putting some of the older records into the computer, working backwards, but it's an 'as we have time' job and we're only at 1972. I'd have to check the paper record."

"I think it's something that'll come up blank," Jim said. "Back in 1968, a man calling himself Stewart Langley claimed to work with CPD. For a number of reasons, we don't think that was his real name or that he was actually a cop. This is really to establish that there *wasn't* a Stewart Langley employed by the CPD at that time."

"A con man?"

"Pretty well. His specialty was seducing underage girls."

She made a face. "Nasty. If you wait a minute, I'll see what I can find." She disappeared through a door to her left.

She was back in a few minutes. "You were right, there's no record of a Stewart Langley. There was a Robert Langley employed as a janitor between 1967 and 1970, but no Stewart."

She handed him a sheet of paper. "I photocopied Robert Langley's details in case he was the guy involved - cop sounds so much more... well, respectable than janitor."

"Thank you," Jim said, with a quick glance at the page. It included a photo, and he smiled. If this *was* Naomi's 'Stewart' they'd probably never be able to track him down - assuming she wanted to, which Jim doubted - but it would confirm whether or not it was. He thought for a quick moment, then took a \$20 bill from his wallet. "I really appreciate it. Buy yourself some chocolates," he said.

"That's not necessary," she said. "Just doing my job."

"If you don't, I'll have to buy some for you, with no guarantee I'll get ones you really like."

She looked at him, grinned, and accepted the money. "I still say you don't need to do that, but thank you."

He grinned back, and left Personnel. He wouldn't say anything to Blair, but he'd show this to Naomi next time she visited - which he suspected wouldn't be long - and see if she identified Robert as 'Stewart'. And meanwhile... he'd see if he could track down Robert Langley...

When he arrived back at the bullpen, it was to find that Blair was still entertaining the detectives there with descriptions of the area around Ballater.

Tracking down Langley next day proved easier than he had expected.

As he read through the record, he quickly discovered that Robert Langley had not in fact quit his job at the PD but had been arrested and charged with having a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old. Following up on that, he found that Langley hadn't lived long enough to be tried; while in detention he had been attacked by another prisoner. Although he had been taken to the prison hospital, apparently suffering from nothing worse than a fairly severe beating, he had died from heart failure...

A man called Langley, working at the PD, targeting underage girls - yes, it would be surprising if this wasn't Naomi's Langley.

Naomi arrived the day before Blair was due to start at the Academy. She looked happier than she ever had on any of her other visits. "I'm only here for three or four days," she said. She glanced at Jim, the habit of secrecy about her writing strong, though she suspected that Blair would tell Jim - especially if he were to continue writing. "I've got a commitment that I must fulfil, and I can't afford to delay any longer than that."

"Going back to Ballater?" Blair asked.

"Yes. I love it there. It's so peaceful. "

Blair smiled a little ruefully. "Yes... I like it too. Always did, when I was a kid, and I enjoyed seeing it all again as an adult. We might visit you there some day."

"Let me know when you want to come. Meanwhile, I'll be back in America in a few weeks - I'll see you then."

They had a quiet evening, Naomi and Blair both telling Jim about Ballater and the area around it. Blair went to bed early, leaving Naomi still talking about how much she loved the small town where she had chosen to live - he had tried to get Naomi to take his room, but she insisted that the couch would be perfectly comfortable.

Jim let her talk for a little longer, half of his attention on Blair. Once he was sure that Blair was sleeping, he held up his hand.

"I have something to show you," he said, reaching for his wallet. Inside, neatly folded, was a sheet of paper. "The photo is fairly small, but..." as he unfolded it, "do you know this man?"

She drew a sharp breath. "That's Stewart."

"I thought it probably was. He's dead - killed in 1970. He appeared to have had a hobby of seducing underage girls." He gave her a quick resume of the facts on the sheet, finishing with, "There was one last lie. According to the personnel record, he wasn't married."

"The bastard! To leave me thinking that... that..."

"Yes. Can you put him behind you now?" Jim's voice was very gentle.

"I think so. Can you let David know, please? We... we had the chance to do a lot of talking while I was there, and I told him everything... But now I just want to forget..."

"Yes."

She left the following Sunday, happy that Blair seemed to be having no problems at the Academy, with Jim and Blair waving her off. As they drove back to the loft, Jim said, "She'll be all right now."

"Yes, I think she will. It might take a while - she has a lot to process - but knowing what happened to her mother... I could tell it meant a lot, to her and to David and Tom."

"And Blair - I tracked down the man who called himself Stewart Langley. He died in 1970."

"Do I want to know more than that?"

"I don't think you do," Jim said.

"I'm better off never having known him?"

"A lot better off."

"Then I'll forget about him."

They were silent for a while. Then Jim said, "David sounded surprised that Naomi could live off her share of their father's money."

"She couldn't. She's been writing books for the last twenty-odd years. Mostly fiction and some travel books. She... she and Sid Graham persuaded me to try writing too."

"You haven't had long enough to write anything - have you?"

"Long enough to start a story. I'd like to finish it - well, I promised Naomi I would - but I probably won't do more than the one."

"Oh, I dunno - it'd give you some extra money - don't you have student loans to pay off?"

"Actually, no; Uncle David paid all my fees, and gave me an allowance."

"With three kids of his own... "

"Yes. I asked him to consider it a loan, but he said no; that I was as much his son as Nathan and Phillip. I think maybe that was part of why Aunt Marta was always a bit withdrawn; seeing her husband treating his nephew exactly the same as his sons. She wasn't cruel, it wasn't the 'evil stepmother' syndrome, I think it was more that she was subtly trying to remind me that I *was* only a nephew. But this last visit - I think she's over it."

"So everything's all right?" Jim asked. It wasn't all he was asking, and Blair knew it.

"Yes," he said. "Everything's all right. Or, at least, it will be - once I finish the Academy and become your permanent, official partner. There'll be no stopping us."

"Damn right," Jim said as he pulled into his usual parking place outside 852 Prospect; and as they walked into the building, he wrapped an arm around Blair's shoulders. "Partner."

