



Who Sups With the Devil

by Bluewolf

art by Courtney Mulligan

It had been a difficult day.

Difficult? Hell, it had been a totally wasted day! Murphy's Law had reigned supreme. Jim sighed as he mounted the stairs to the loft, resigned to the fact that his partner had not yet arrived home - no, he hadn't suddenly developed second sight, the absence of Blair's car from its accustomed spot was a dead giveaway. Not that he had expected Blair home yet, but that hadn't stopped him hoping that his friend had managed to finish early.

Inside the loft, Jim went up the steps to his bedroom, changed from his court suit into more comfortable sweats and, feeling subtly better and slightly more relaxed, went back down the stairs, crossed to the kitchen and took a bottle of beer from the fridge. He flicked on the TV, lowered the sound from the lowest level where Blair could hear it without straining his ears to the slightly lower level that he found most relaxing, then sank into the comfort of the couch, letting the soft background voices wash soothingly over him without bothering to register what they were saying.

God, if he never had a day like this one again, it would be too soon.

Waiting in court to give evidence was a boring occupation at the best of times; especially when he didn't have Blair's company to brighten it. Blair could always find something interesting to discuss... but Blair was involved with setting up a display at Rainier and had warned him that he would certainly be late. "Professor Carrol can never make his mind up," Blair had said the night before. "We'll get everything laid out and we think we're finished, then suddenly he'll decide that no, **this** artifact would look better over **there**, but that unbalances everything else in the display, so we have to start over and rearrange everything. Then he's quite likely to change his mind again and decide it looked better somewhere else, then somewhere else, and end up where it was in the first place. It's a wonder to me that he ever managed to finish any of his theses - I'd have expected him to keep tweaking them forever, trying to get just *the* best wording."

Jim let his mind wander over the events of the day. The entire case he and Beverley Sanchez had spent weeks putting together had collapsed because of a crazy, once-in-a-hundred years - no, once-in-a-thousand years - accident.

The main witness lived beside the sea. A fitness fanatic, Dave Watt had been walking to court, and two minutes after he left his house a freak wave broke over the railing that topped the sea wall and dragged him into the water. With a severe swell running and waves constantly breaking against the wall, probably disoriented from the unexpectedness of it, he hadn't been able to swim to safety. His body still hadn't been recovered. It had taken some time before the court discovered what had happened to the missing witness.

Jim couldn't even think that Watt had been killed by friends of the accused man to prevent him from testifying; several people had seen what happened - one of them had even been caught by the same wave, but had been in a position where he

was swept against an upright of the railing instead of straight under it; he managed to catch it and didn't go into the sea. And it was just sheer chance that one of those people had been able to name the missing man.

Of course, if by some miracle Watt was found alive further down the coast, the trial could be resumed if the accused man was stupid enough to stay where he could be picked up again, but Jim had no hope of that.

Fortunately Dwight Evans wasn't the kind of scum that preyed on children or even the general public - an accountant, he had embezzled over a million dollars from the firm he worked for - and since the firm's profits, after tax, averaged out at close on five billion for a single year, not even the cops felt any great sympathy for the robbed firm and its shareholders, even though they still worked conscientiously to build the case against the thief. Annoying though it was, if a perp had to walk, at least this one was not a danger to society. And since almost none of the missing money had been recovered, it was unlikely that Evans would take the chance of robbing another firm - if he even bothered looking for another job, rather than live off the proceeds of this theft.

Sighing, Jim glanced again at his watch. Blair's assessment had been right - he was now at least an hour late. With a mental snap of his fingers, Jim reached for the phone, and dialed Blair's cell phone.

It was answered on the third ring. "Blair Sandburg."

"Hi, Chief. Still at Rainier?"

"Yes, but we shouldn't be much longer." The 'I hope' was clear in his voice.

"Would you stop somewhere on your way home and get dinner for us?"

He could hear the grin in Blair's voice as he said, "Bad day?"

"Wasted day. I don't care where you go. It'll at least give me the illusion of something going right."

"That bad, huh? Okay, I shouldn't be more than another hour - I hope - even stopping for a take-out. Chinese? Italian? Any preference?"

"Whatever you want will do fine. You know the things I like."

Blair slipped his phone back into his pocket and turned back to the three display cabinets he was rearranging for the fifth - and, he hoped, last - time. With careful deliberation, he moved several of the artifacts just a little, leaving them apparently the way Professor Carrol had instructed, but in actual fact spaced just a little differently, according to Blair's own idea of what would look good. He nudged one item in the third cabinet over a little further and stood back to consider it.

Carrol hurried over and studied the cabinets. "Yes," he said. "That last arrangement looks good. I think we'll leave it like this." He moved on to the next unit, where Mike Leaman had copied Blair, and made some minor adjustments of his own. Blair heard him approving Leaman's work, and grinned over at his fellow TA, both men knowing that they wouldn't get any credit for the final, approved, display, but both feeling it was worth it if Carrol would just let them get *home*.

It had taken them close on nine hours to 'accomplish' something that could have - should have - been done in a maximum of two.

They heard Carrol's querulous voice criticizing Stuart McColl's arrangement, and Mike gazed heavenward very briefly. Stuart was a conscientious and hard-working TA, but - possibly because he lacked self-confidence - he had the initiative of a half-witted slug, and had carefully followed Carrol's directions for the layout, every single time. After some moments, Carrol called over. "Sandburg, Leaman - I don't think you two will need to make any more adjustments - you can go."

"Thank you, Professor," Blair called, and the two men scurried out before Carrol could change his mind again.

Stopping first at Mike's 'office' - originally a janitor's storage closet, it was even smaller than Blair's segment of Artifact Storage Room 3 - for him to pick up his jacket, they went on to Blair's for his jacket, and left the building together, exchanging mordant, albeit slightly sympathetic, comments regarding Carrol's decisiveness, as well as how much longer it would take Stuart, following Carrol's instructions to the letter, to produce something that satisfied the Professor.

They separated at the parking lot, since their cars were at opposite sides of the exit, Blair's slightly further from it. Blair instantly forgot about Mike as he made his way to his car, debating what to get for dinner. Getting into the Volvo, he fastened his seat belt, started the engine and drove off, reminded briefly of his fellow TA as he saw the back of Mike's car disappearing as it left the parking lot. Then he too turned onto the road, and promptly forgot once more about his fellow TA.

He stopped at Wonderburger, knowing that Jim would appreciate that after a 'wasted day' - he wondered briefly what had gone wrong, because when Jim left for court that morning he had been considering the trial not much more than a formality, sure to be over by lunchtime. And although Blair himself wasn't particularly fond of hamburgers, there was a KFC just another street away where he could get something more to his taste. All right, deep fried wasn't exactly the healthiest option either, but fried chicken was far healthier than hamburger!

Dinner for them both purchased, Blair headed on home.

The story of Jim's wasted day was soon told; but Blair kept Jim chuckling over the details of *his* frustrating day for quite some time. Now that he was home, Blair could

see the more amusing - yet somehow tragic - aspects of Carrol's indecisiveness; in his own way, he was as lacking in self-confidence as Stuart McColl, but he was in a position of responsibility that forced him to be, or at least appear to be, self-confident. He had probably realized that two of his three student helpers had been able to exercise their own initiative, use their own experience (since this wasn't the first display they had helped set up) to (eventually) adjust his instructions slightly, just enough to make it look as if they had followed those instructions while actually improving on them, and had just possibly been quite grateful that they had.

Finally, with both men relaxed after what had been two different kinds of stressful day, they went to bed.

Morning saw Jim on his way to the PD while Blair headed back to Rainier. At least this day he wouldn't have to waste several hours catering to Professor Carrol's indecisiveness - unless the man had finally lost patience with McColl the previous night, dismissed him, and planned to call on either Blair or Mike to finish setting up the final display cabinet - and Blair knew that Mike didn't have to be at Rainier that day.

In his 'office', Blair collected his notes for the lecture he would be giving at ten, glanced quickly over them - unnecessarily; this was a lecture he had given so often he could have done it in his sleep, even though he updated it every year, because he was well aware of all the recent developments that called for that updating. Some TAs, even some professors, he knew didn't bring their lectures up to date on a regular basis... He remembered one elderly professor he had had when he was a freshman, who was probably using the lecture notes he had taken when he was a student. The uncle of one of the other students in Blair's class had also suffered through Dr. Hope's lectures some thirty years previously. He had kept his notes, then gave them to his nephew, who compared the notes with the ones he was taking, and found them virtually identical. Blair had no intention of ever being that predictable. He then made his way to the lecture room, arriving before most of the students.

The lecture went well - for the first few minutes. He was some ten minutes into it when the door opened and one of the secretaries came in. Blair broke off in mid-sentence.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Sandburg." In this class situation, Dawn Meadows kept things professional. "You were working with Professor Carrol yesterday, weren't you?"

Blair nodded. "Yes, Mr. Leaman, Mr. McColl and I were helping him set up an exhibition that's due to open on Thursday."

"Did you all leave together?"

Blair shook his head. "Mr. Leaman and I left together, but Professor Carrol and Mr. McColl were still working on one of the displays. That would have been around 7pm."

She frowned and moved a little closer, dropping her voice. "Blair, both Stuart and Professor Carrol are missing. They didn't come in this morning. Stuart was giving a lecture at nine, and didn't show up for it; the Professor had a meeting at nine-thirty, and didn't show up for that."

"That's odd. Stuart has his faults, but he's conscientious - he would have to be dead before he'd not turn up for something he was supposed to be doing." Now that he was speaking quietly enough for the students not to overhear, Blair reverted to his preferred informality, as Dawn had done.

"And the Professor's meeting was an important one dealing with funding for something. We phoned them both, but only got an answer machine at the Professor's, and no answer at all from Stuart."

"You have checked that they actually left last night?" Blair asked. "Professor Carrol was obsessing a bit over getting everything just right, and Stuart just wasn't getting it quite the way the Professor wanted it."

"The door to the display suite is locked, so we're assuming they left." Dawn hesitated. "The odd thing, though, is that the key is missing. As if the Professor took it home with him."

"Well, he might have done, though I can't think of any reason why he should. He isn't likely to worry about anyone disturbing the display - the various cabinets all lock, so even if someone went into the room he wouldn't be able to touch anything. Does anyone else have a key? Security, for example?"

"Yes... Security should have a key."

Blair thought for a moment. "Okay - go and get it. I'll dismiss the class, and meet you at the door of the display suite; we'll go in together. I don't expect there to be a problem, but if there is, we can alibi each other."

Dawn looked a little startled, but nodded and went out. Blair turned to the class. "Okay, people, you have a choice - either we cut this short now and cover this lecture another day, or you wait till I've checked out Professor Carrol's exhibition and come back. It shouldn't take more than ten, fifteen minutes. You can spend the time reading chapter five of *People of the Amazon* - which in any case will be your homework for next class."

Blair was pleased when the overwhelming decision was to stay.

He headed off to the display suite; Dawn, accompanied by head of Security Suzanne Tamaki, arrived just a minute or two behind him. Suzanne unlocked the door and they went in. It was quite dim in the room, the single small window

inadequate to let anyone see anything in it clearly. Blair switched on the light, thinking, as he did, that its being off proved that Carrol and Stuart had left the previous evening.

Dawn gave a startled squeak - a sound not really loud enough to be called a scream, though the timbre was not dissimilar. Blair swung around.

With the light off, the display cabinets had been darker shapes in the dark ambiance of the room, with nothing else obvious. With the light switched on, the body lying in front of one of the cabinets was clear to see. Blair joined Suzanne as she bent over it, one hand feeling for a pulse in the neck. She shook her head. "Dead," she said, "and quite cold."

The body was lying face down, though the head had rolled over a little so that one side of the face could be seen. "It's Professor Carrol," Blair said unnecessarily. He was already reaching into his pocket for his cell phone.

"But what could have happened?" Dawn whispered.

"Door locked, key missing," Blair said. "He didn't just collapse and die. Someone killed him."

As he spoke, he was dialing 911.

While they waited for Forensics and Homicide, Blair went back to his students and dismissed them. "I'm going to be tied up for a fair while. You already know your assignment for next class."

"Is something wrong, sir?" someone asked.

"Yes," Blair said. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "I might as well tell you; you'll hear about it soon enough anyway. We found Professor Carrol dead. No - " He held up his hand to stop the questions they were beginning to throw at him. "I can't tell you more than that, because that's all I know. We've called the police, and I have to get back before they arrive. If you want to be helpful, don't get in anyone's way. Don't ask them what's happened; they have a job to do, and if they're having to deal with bystanders they can't get it done properly. I'll tell you as much as I can next time I see you. It probably won't be much, but it will be accurate, unlike some of the rumors that you'll probably hear in the next few hours."

He saw them out of the room, and headed back to the display suite.

Homicide arrived first, but only by a couple of minutes.

The homicide detectives, Blair was glad to see, were two men he knew, John Cox and Roger Tamlin. "Hey, guys!" he said.

"Blair! Might have known you'd be involved." But Roger was grinning.

"Yeah, nothing happens at Rainier when you aren't around," John agreed. "What have you got for us?"

"Not quite a locked room mystery, but close to one," Blair said. "You know Suzanne Tamaki? Head of Security here. Suzanne, Roger Tamlin and John Cox, Homicide."

"Suzanne," Roger acknowledged. "This has to be a bit more than you're used to dealing with."

"More than I ever expected to have to deal with when I came here," she agreed wryly. "I was a detective in Tacoma, so dealing with a murder isn't a new experience for me. Came here after a really bad case left me burned out. At least this one doesn't involve children."

Anything else she might have said was lost when Forensics joined them.

"Hello, Blair," Serena said.

"Serena," Blair said. "Suzanne, this is Serena Baxter, head of Forensics. Serena, Suzanne Tamaki is head of Security. And this is Dawn Meadows, one of the Anthro department's secretaries."

"Right." Roger, the senior Homicide detective, took over. "Serena, you and your team check out the murder scene. Ms. Tamaki, what is your involvement in this?"

"Dawn came to me looking for the key because the one in the office is missing. I accompanied her here - Blair was waiting for us - and unlocked the door for them."

Roger nodded. "John, you speak to Ms. Meadows; Blair, if you'll come over here with me?"

"We'll be more comfortable if you come to my office," Blair suggested.

"Fair enough," Roger agreed, and Blair took him to Hargrove Hall. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Dawn had had a similar idea, and was taking John in the direction of her office.

Once sitting in the office (Blair having first tossed some papers off the visitors' chair) Roger said, "So how did you get involved in this?"

"Professor Carrol was setting up a display of Peruvian artifacts covering at least two thousand years," Blair said. "Paracas, Moche, Wari, Nazca, Chimu, Inca. Most of them are replicas, of course - a century ago, anything excavated was carried off to whatever museum or university funded the excavation, and what they have is jealously hoarded because it won't be added to. Today, finds are kept in the countries of origin. For example, there's a museum at the Chimu city of Chan Chan where everything found there now is kept - Sorry. I tend to get carried away -"

Roger laughed. "I know that," he said. "In this case - it probably won't go into my report, but it's giving me some background. Go on."

"Three of the Anthropology TAs were roped in to help set up the display - Mike Leaman, Stuart McColl, and me. We spent several hours on it yesterday. About seven, Professor Carrol approved what Mike and I had done, and let us go; Stuart was still finalizing the last display case he was setting up - Carrol wasn't happy with how the things in it were arranged, and he was blaming Stuart for not getting things right. Mike and I left together, went to his office for his jacket then here, for mine, then we went to the parking lot together. His car was slightly nearer the exit, and he left first."

"You actually saw him leaving?"

"Yes. He drove out just as I started to move. I picked up take out for dinner - Wonderburger for Jim and KFC for me - and went home. This morning, I was a few minutes into giving my first lecture of the day - I'm due to give another one this afternoon at two - when Dawn - Ms. Meadows - came in to ask me if I knew anything about Carrol or Stuart - Stuart hadn't shown up for a class at nine, Carrol had missed an important meeting at half past. She'd phoned and didn't get an answer from either of them. She knew about the display, went there first to see if Carrol, at least, was there, but the door was locked and the key was missing. So I sent her to get Security's key, left my class doing make work so I could go in with her - hey, working with Jim has made me... let's say aware of a need for back-up - though I fully expected the room to be empty, with Carrol having just shoved the key into his pocket before he went home, and possibly overslept this morning. But when we went in... there he was on the floor."

"Did you touch anything?"

"Suzanne checked the body, but didn't move it at all. She checked for a neck pulse, there wasn't one, and she said the body was quite cold. Dawn and I didn't touch anything. Oh - except I switched the light on when we first went in."

"And there's been no sign this morning of the other man - McColl?"

"None." Blair thought for a moment, then said, "I know that looks bad, but I've never seen Stuart lose his temper over anything. Yes, when Mike and I left, Carrol was criticizing what Stuart had done with the layout, but all that was going to do was make Stuart try harder to do exactly what he was told."

Roger shook his head. "Sometimes the evenest-tempered man can be driven too far."

"Beware the anger of a patient man," Blair agreed. "But Stuart... I wouldn't describe him as patient. Or even-tempered. He has no self-confidence; if someone more decisive tells him he's wrong, he'll accept that as a valid criticism. He wouldn't even think, 'I know I'm not wrong' because he's never certain that he's right unless he's actually quoting from something he's read, and even then he has to have the book in front of him, otherwise it's easy to make him believe he's misremembered

whatever it is. He's a good enough teacher, because when he's teaching he's working from books, or from the notes he's made from his books; he'll never be a researcher because that would involve making his own decisions, reaching his own conclusions. He doesn't have the initiative to make his own decisions. Even when he sets exams, they're always multiple choice. What he wants to do, eventually, I don't know. He's found a niche here, as a TA. I think he'd be happy to spend the rest of his life here, working as a TA, but I can't see that happening. Sooner or later he'll have to move on."

Roger thought that over for a minute. "I'm speaking to you now in your role as Ellison's partner, not as a witness. From your knowledge of him, do you think he's at all likely to have killed Professor Carrol, then gone on the run?"

"No. Even in the unlikely event that he got angry, Stuart wouldn't have the remotest idea how to go about killing anyone. You know what I'm like - I try to talk my way out of a situation, though if someone annoyed me enough I might punch him on the jaw; but Stuart? He'd be more likely to turn and run out."

"Removing himself from the situation that was making him angry?"

"Yes. It's... " Blair hesitated. "We're mostly what our parents made us. Sometimes another adult becomes a sort of role model, has some influence over how we turn out. My mother was a sixties flower child; rebelling against her parents' standards, and I don't say she was totally wrong, because although I never met them, from what Naomi said they were selfish, bigoted... filthy rich, living off the interest from their capital, and the appearance of respectability was important to them. When she got pregnant, they wanted her to get an abortion, but she refused and walked out, though even then they didn't discontinue her allowance, which makes me wonder just how accurate her assessment was - and when they died, they left her all their money, which lets *her* live a life of doing exactly what she wants to do. What she objected to them doing.

"What saved me from a totally useless life of - well, wandering aimlessly and protesting things purely for the sake of making a protest, without considering both sides of the... whatever, was coming to Rainier. Mom thought that because I loved reading and learning, an academic life would - well - "

"Keep you away from life's harsh realities?" Roger suggested.

"Yeah, that's probably the best way to put it. She was horrified when I linked up with Jim... It's not that she dislikes him, but she dislikes what he is. What he does. Anyway, at Rainier Dr. Stoddard took me under his wing, and opened my eyes to other possibilities in life than mindless protests. Oh, I still believe in things like protect the rainforest and gun control, though my anthropology studies made me look at some things with a fresh eye. There are the ruins of some quite big cities in the heart of some of the rainforests, which says they weren't always rainforest. And there were quite advanced cultures in areas that are now desert.

"Anyway - " he pulled his attention back to the original subject - "I wonder just what Stuart's parents did to destroy his self-confidence - because they're the ones who must have seen to it that he has none."

"Maybe a mother who wanted to keep her 'baby'?" Roger said.

"Yes, but his father had to have been happy with that too. Maybe a father who criticized everything he did that showed original thought, wanting a son who was a mirror image of himself? And a mother who said yes and amen to whatever her husband decided?" Blair sighed. "We've wandered a long way off the subject, haven't we." And he spared a wry thought that he was the one who had realized that; normally he was the one who had to be pulled back onto whatever the subject was.

"Blair, getting a picture of a suspect's personality from people who know him - you have to know from Jim how important that can be. I still can't totally discount McColl as the killer, but what you've told me about him means that he isn't the automatic suspect; I'll be looking at other possibilities as well."

"I suppose in a way Mike and I are suspect too."

"Well, you can alibi each other up until you left here; it's easy enough to check approximate times for you to drive home via Wonderburger and KFC, and if you spent the rest of your evening with Ellison - "

"Yes."

"I'd say you're well down the list of possible suspects."

"Now, your other TA - Mike?"

"He's not in today. We don't teach every day, especially when we're working on a doctoral dissertation. Basically we do the donkey work for whichever professor we assist, freeing them for things like research, though that doesn't mean they never take any lectures. I don't actually know where he lives, but Dawn - Ms. Meadows - should be able to tell you. We get on all right, but we're not friends; just colleagues."

"Well, obviously I will need to speak to him, but from what you've said there's no hurry; I can catch him tomorrow."

Blair spent the rest of the morning working on his dissertation, gave his two o'clock lecture, then headed for the PD. Once there, he wasn't surprised to learn that Jim already knew about Carrol's death. Of course, Roger Tamlin would have checked Blair's alibi; even though Blair worked with the police, no detective worth his salt would take any suspect - no matter how unlikely - at face value. Which in this case meant asking Jim about Blair's whereabouts the previous night.

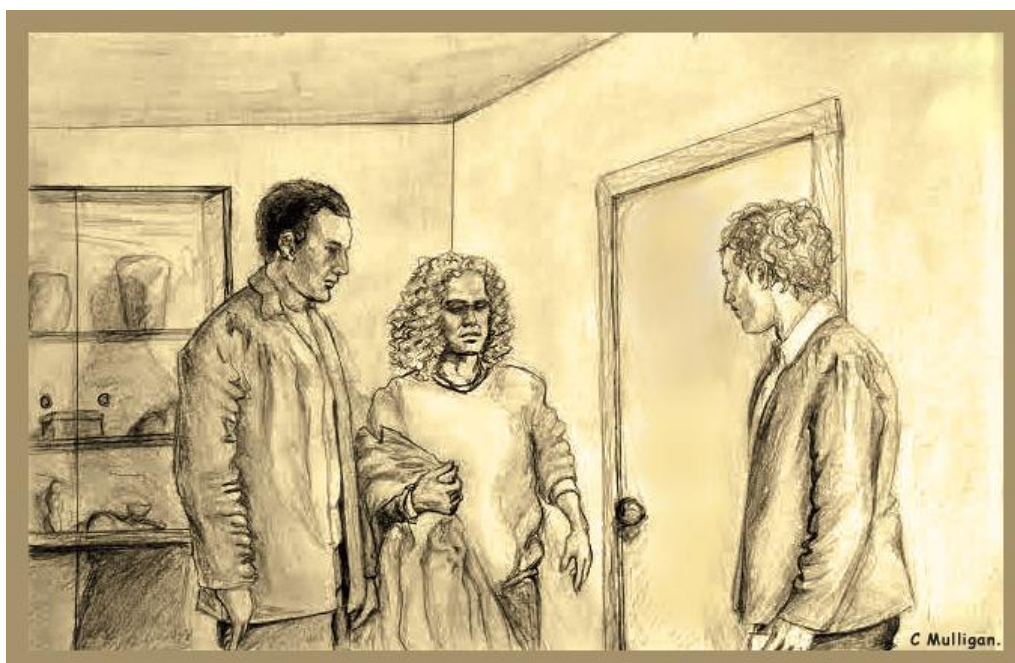
"And there was no indication that anything was wrong when you left last night?"

"No," Blair said. He sighed. "The obvious suspect is Stuart, especially since he's missing, but as I told Detective Tamlin - " in this situation, he chose to retain formality - "it's just not his nature. He'd be more likely to burst into tears than lose his temper and lash out." He frowned slightly. "But, you know... there's something about this bugging me. When I was there, obviously I was being careful not to touch anything even though my fingerprints will be all over the display cases I arranged and a fair bit of the rest of the room as well. My attention was mostly on Carrol's body, and then on giving as full a description of what happened last night as I could. But it occurs to me... something in the back of my mind is saying that I missed something. Would you come back to Rainier with me to have a look at the room? We could take Roger Tamlin as well, because it's his case - I don't think it's anything where you'd have to use your senses."

Jim looked at him for a moment and reached for his phone. "Homicide... Yes, Detective Tamlin, please... Ellison here. Blair wants another look at the room where they found Carrol. Since it's your case - Yes, see you in the garage in five minutes." He hung up the phone. "Come on, Chief. Let's go and find what you think you missed."

Because Roger drove a car, not a truck, they went in his vehicle. John Cox didn't accompany them - he was out trying to track down anyone who might have seen the missing Stuart McColl the previous evening. As they went, Roger said, "So why do you want to have another look at the room, Blair?"

"I just have this nagging feeling... something I feel I should have seen, should have noticed, but didn't, if you follow me."



"Well, it's your turf," Roger agreed, "and a room you were working in just yesterday." He clearly had questions, but was disciplined enough to wait until they returned to the scene of the killing before asking them.

There was still police tape over the door of the exhibition room, though the forensics team had gone. Roger, as lead detective in the case, had stopped to get the key; he unlocked the door and the three men ducked under the tape and went into the room.

"Dark in here," Roger commented.

"That was why I switched the light on this morning," Blair pointed out. Although he knew the room would have been checked already for fingerprints, he pulled on a latex glove and switched the light on again, then looked around the room, frowning slightly. As his gaze slid past Jim, he noticed that his partner had a very intent look on his face, and he knew that Jim was aware of something. And then Blair realized...

"That's odd," he said. "That was probably what I noticed this morning without registering it..."

"What?" Roger asked.

Blair indicated a door. "That's a walk-in closet. It's used to store things like extra display cases, and the door's never usually closed - when there is a display, we use it as an extension of the room, to hang pictures of where artifacts have come from, a map of the area... There's no reason for it to be shut." He crossed to it, turned the handle... and stiffened. "It's been locked. It's never locked."

"Who'd have the key?" Roger asked.

"I didn't know there even was a key for it," Blair said. "Yes, I know there's a lock on the door, but - like I said, it's never locked. Normally it's never even closed," he repeated. "Everyone assumed that the key was lost long ago. If there was one, I'd have expected it to be hanging up beside the key to the main door of the room, but for as long as I've been involved in helping set up displays here there never was a second key. Dawn - the secretary - would probably know if there was one tucked away somewhere. Want me to go and ask her?"

There was the barest split second of hesitation, then Roger said slowly, "No, I'll go myself. It was John who questioned her, and I've seen his report - there are a couple more things I'd like to ask her."

"Okay." Blair turned away to look at the display Stuart had been working on the previous night when he and Mike left.

Once Roger was safely away, Blair looked over at Jim. "You're aware of something?" he asked softly.

"I think your friend McColl is in that closet."

"Dead?" Blair asked. Jim nodded. "Same killer?"

"It would be surprising if it wasn't."

"But... "

"But?"

"There hasn't been a key for that door for - well, pretty well as long as I've been here. I can't say anything definite for the first couple of years, because as a freshman and even a sophomore I wasn't involved at all in setting up displays, but for the last ten years there certainly hasn't been a key. So how did a killer get hold of one?"

"Good question," Jim muttered. "The other thing is... since he did, there's premeditation involved in this. So which of the two victims was the actual target?"

"Professor Carrol," Blair said without hesitation. "With this door locked, Stuart's body could lie in there for several days before someone noticed an obvious smell and Campus Security investigated it. That would give several days, maybe a week, where Stuart was the most obvious suspect... giving the actual killer that much time to cover his tracks."

They looked at each other again, and Blair turned his attention back to the display. "You know... there's something wrong here," he said after some moments.

"Wrong? How do you know?"

Blair crossed to the displays he and Mike had set up and checked them quickly. Then he looked at the two Stuart had done that Carrol had finally approved, then went back to the last one.

"There's something missing from this case."

"How can you be sure - " Jim broke off as the door opened and Roger came back in, followed by Suzanne Tamaki. Suzanne went over to the closet, pulled on the glove that Roger handed her, and tried the door.

"Not that I doubted you," she said, "but my job requires that I check everything myself. Chancellor Edwards is very strict about things like that."

"I take it, then, that Blair's right? There isn't a key for this door?" Jim asked.

"The only secretary who can remember anyone looking for a key for it said it was at least twenty-three years ago, just after she began working here, and even then nobody knew where it was," Suzanne told him. "She remembers because the professor who wanted it made such a fuss about it. Apparently he had two or three things he wanted in his display that he felt needed the security of two locked doors at night, when there was nobody around."

"That seems odd. Oh, sometimes something pretty rare is borrowed for a display like this - but usually the rarest things lent for display are just replicas, and I don't think it would have been any different twenty-three years ago. Seventy-three years ago, possibly, but not twenty-three. Most of this is replica - " Blair waved a hand round the room.

"Most? Not all?" Roger asked.

"About 5% is genuine," Blair said. "Some artifacts are relatively common, and have little intrinsic value. People like Professor Carrol, who have been on a fair number of expeditions over the years, often acquire some of those for a personal collection. Even a student like me - I've been on several expeditions, and brought home some 'souvenirs' that I've bought from the tribes we visited. But it's all the equivalent of... well, someone from one of those tribes visiting here and taking home a cheap mass-produced vase. Unusual to his eyes, rare in his world therefore precious to him... but an expert there would see it for what it was. Okay, what you buy from one of those tribes is hand made, one of a kind insofar as everything hand made is going to have fractional differences between one piece and the next - a knot in the wood, perhaps, giving it a distinguishing mark that the maker has used as decoration - but the object itself isn't rare.

"This - " Blair waved a hand around the room - "is historical in context, so a lot of it - at least, the originals - is rare. The Paracas, for example - the oldest culture in the display - dates back over two thousand years. Even the Incan, the most recent, goes back five hundred years. A lot of Incan artifacts were destroyed by the Spanish, making what's left more valuable than it might otherwise have been - "

"Chief," Jim interrupted. "You're getting off the point. We need to get into that room."

"Miss Meadows is calling a locksmith," Roger said. "Until he arrives, we're just sort of marking time. Blair's knowledge of this stuff could give us a clue to why Professor Carrol was killed."

"Sorry," Jim muttered. "It was just... "

"I don't need much encouragement to hold forth at interminable length about things that aren't really of interest except to another anthropologist or archaeologist," Blair admitted.

"On the other hand," Jim said, looking at Roger, "just before you came back, Blair was saying that he thinks there's something missing from one of the display cases."

"There is? What?" Roger asked.

"I can't be sure," Blair said, "because it wasn't one of the cases I set up - it was the one Stuart was still working on when I left last night. But Professor Carrol was very... predictable, in some ways, when he was organizing a display like this. He liked symmetry, though often something just a touch away from being symmetrical is

more effective, especially if the things laid out are all different sizes. He always gave his assistants an even number of items to lay out." He turned to the last display case. "This shelf has an odd number of items on it."

"He wouldn't just have miscounted?" Roger asked.

Blair shook his head. "Unlikely. If he had, he'd either have fetched another artifact from his personal collection or removed one from here as soon as he realized it." He looked at the items again. "I wouldn't necessarily recognize if a piece came from it, but I've seen all of Professor Carrol's personal collection. There were some nice pieces in it, even a couple that he claimed were original, but not even those were of major value; certainly not worth killing for. Everything he'd borrowed from museums and other universities would definitely have been replicas - again, not worth killing for. It looks to me as if someone, presumably the killer, took that missing item, but I just don't understand why."

They were interrupted by Dawn Meadows who, after a perfunctory knock on the open door, led in a middle-aged man who was carrying a small bag. She crossed to Roger. "This is George Adams, Detective."

"Locksmith," Adams said. "Understand you've a locked door and no key."

"That's right," Roger said. "Apparently this door - " he indicated it - "is usually kept open, and the key to it was lost years ago. But it's locked now, however someone managed to do it, and we're wondering why."

"Anyone with a halfway decent skeleton key could lock it - or unlock it," Adams said. He looked closely at the lock, nodded and took a fairly large key ring, on which were fastened several keys, from his bag. He tried one, shook his head, tried another and turned it. "There you are," he said.

Roger nodded. "Send your bill to Homicide, CPD central precinct," he said as he opened the door.

It was dark inside the closet; he groped around, found a light switch and switched on the light. He took a deep breath.

"Blair," he said quietly, "I think we've found your missing TA."

"I thought you weren't in today," Mike Leaman said as he met Blair in the corridor just outside his 'office'. "But since you are - what happened yesterday?" He sounded a bit uneasy.

"How much do you actually know?" Blair asked.

"Nothing," Mike said. "I was away - it was a spur of the moment thing - I've relatives in Seattle that I haven't seen for a while, so I drove down there on Monday night, spent

yesterday with the family, and came back this morning. But I've overheard some talk since I got here, enough to let me know something happened that brought the police out - "

"Murder," Blair said. "Professor Carrol and Stuart. I'd have expected you to hear something about it on the news. It was yesterday's big story."

"We were too busy catching up on family gossip to bother about TV. Both of them? How?"

"They were both missing yesterday morning. We checked the display room - it was locked and the key missing, but Security has a spare. The Professor was lying dead - strangled - and at first it was assumed that he'd maybe driven Stuart into losing his temper. But the walk-in closet door was closed - "

"Huh? It's never closed!" Mike exclaimed.

" - and locked - "

"There isn't a key! Is there? Do the office staff have one stashed away somewhere, and the door's just left open because that's more convenient?"

"Dawn called in a locksmith and he got it open. Stuart was in there, also strangled. And there's an item missing from the last display case Stuart was setting up. And now you know as much as I do."

"That's... crazy," Mike said.

"Isn't it. The really crazy thing is the missing item from the display. Almost all of that stuff is replica, totally without value. Even the two or three genuine pieces aren't worth that much."

"Blair, how do you know there's a piece missing?"

"This was the first time you helped set up a display for Carrol, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I've mostly worked with Dr Harding."

"I've done a few for Carrol. Thing is, he always had an even number of items on display. Always. One of the shelves in Stuart's third display case had an odd number of things on it. There's no way Carrol would have left it like that. He was almost phobic about odd numbers."

"But you don't know what's missing?"

"It could be one of the replicas Carrol borrowed, it could have been something genuine from his personal collection. All I can be sure of is that everything on the shelf it's missing from is Chimu. There should be lists of everything Carrol borrowed in his office. That's really why I'm in today; the police want me to check the Chimu replicas against the lists, to see if there's any possibility that the motive was the theft

of one of those - though why anyone would want to steal a cheap replica, goodness only knows - but if it was one of his own items... "

"He'll have had a list, surely?"

Blair shook his head. "Not necessarily. You've got a few things - do you have a list of them?"

"No... but like you said, I just have two or three things."

"I've got some, mostly for illustrating lectures, and I know what's there, but I've never written down what I have. I suppose I should, but I don't have anything that's at all valuable. None of it is historical, it's all modern. I wouldn't expect Carrol had anything particularly valuable either - well, you know how things are now - anything found stays in its country of origin."

"Maybe the missing piece is a red herring," Mike said. "You said Stuart's body was in the closet, and the closet was locked. If the police hadn't thought to go to the bother of getting it open, how long would it have been before he was found?"

"Could have been long enough," Blair said. "Eventually someone in the main room would have smelled something and he'd have been found then... Anything from a week, maybe, to months, more likely. It would depend on what TPTB decide to do about the display - it was scheduled to last a month. If Edwards decided to cancel it, get us - that would be you and me because we helped set it up - to pack everything up in the next day or two for return to wherever it came from, it'd be a month before anyone needed to go in to set up the next display - but as I remember, the next display is a scientific one, and that'll be set up in Franklin Hall. So two months at least before the room would be needed again... "

"So maybe it was someone who wanted one of them dead, killed the other as well so he wouldn't be identified, took one of the display pieces to make it look as if the motive was theft, shut Stuart's body in the closet to make it look as if he was the killer - "

"The trouble with that as a theory is the closet door key. That says the whole thing was premeditated, and it was pretty well thought out. The killer was able to lock the closet. One of the secretaries said there hasn't been a key for that door for at least twenty-three years. The killer knew that - or at least must have known the key's been lost for a long time - and thought this up long enough ago that he was somehow able to get a key. We only set it up this week, but the display has been advertised for at least three months, after all." Blair shook his head. "We could speculate till the cows come home, but all speculation really is... is guessing what might have happened, second guessing the killer's motives."

"I suppose... "

"Meanwhile - you said you came here this morning straight from Seattle?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you should phone the police and let them know you're here. They questioned me, they're bound to want to question you - pure routine, because we're the last people apart from the killer who saw Carrol and Stuart alive. Central precinct, ask for Homicide, Detective Tamlin or Detective Cox. They're leaving me to check the lists of what should be in the display because a, I know what I'm looking at and b, I've been working with the police for close on three years - I'm practically one of them."

"Yeah... yeah, I'll do that." Mike nodded goodbye and carried on along the corridor.

Blair left his backpack and jacket in his 'office', and went to see Chancellor Edwards, to find out what was now planned for the display.

She greeted him with an expression that even one of her few admirers would have called an ungracious scowl.

"Well, Mr. Sandburg?"

The scowl and sour note in her voice were no more - or less - than he had expected.

"Did the police tell you that they think there's an item missing from the display in room 124?"

"Yes, though I'm at a loss to understand how anyone can possibly think that." Her tone said that she knew it was because of what Blair had told them.

Blair decided not to explain. "The police have asked me - because I helped set it up - to check the items in the display against the lists the lending institutions included, to see if there actually is an item missing, and if so, what it is. At the same time - under the circumstances, is Rainier going ahead with the exhibition?"

"Of course. To do anything else would disrespect Professor Carrol's work and reputation."

"There's one shelf in the display that's not laid out quite the way the Professor wanted," Blair went on. "The one he and Mr. McColl were still working on when Mr. Leaman and I left on Monday. As one of his assistants, should I finish setting it up?"

"Do you know how Professor Carrol wanted it laid out?"

"Yes."

"Then yes, I suppose you might as well do that." Her voice was very sour.

"I'll need access to Professor Carrol's office to get the lists of what he borrowed," Blair added.

Edwards picked up her phone and hit a button. "Norma, get someone to collect the key to Professor Carrol's office and take Mr. Sandburg there to collect some paperwork." She put the phone down. "My secretary will get you access to the office."

"Thank you, Chancellor."

As Blair shut the door between Edwards' office and the secretary's he took a deep breath, glad that *that* was over. Edwards did not like him, and he - although he thought he hid it better than she did - did not like her. Though not many people at Rainier did like her. She was, he admitted, good at her job, but did it with all the subtlety of a Tyrannasaurus charging down its next meal, not caring who she trampled on as she did it. Many of Rainier's staff, particularly the junior ones, had spent time licking wounds she had inflicted, and in Blair's case there was a total personality clash. He was very laid back, informal; she didn't have a relaxed bone in her body, and regarded informality as... well, total lack of respect, which was probably why she was prepared to call her secretary by her first name. Her secretary was an *underling*, and no matter how competent she was, she was a lower form of life than those in the upper echelons of Power.

Was that attitude because, in her own way, she was as lacking in self-confidence as Carrol? She seemed decisive enough, but she was totally inflexible. Was she afraid that to be seen changing her mind about anything, anything at all, would make her look weak?

He grinned slightly to himself. His minor in psychology was showing!

Norma was still speaking on the phone. She gave him a weak smile as she put her phone down. "Dawn'll take you to Professor Carrol's office," she said.

He smiled back. "Thanks," he said warmly, and left, half aware that in a way he had provided a very brief uplift to her day. Just how much approval or gratitude did Edwards ever show her? Probably none.

Blair had grown up accepting things as they came; Naomi had seen to that. Possessions, to Naomi, only tied one down; only proved it was very easy to make someone envious if they saw you owned something they did not. Blair was happy enough in his corner of Artifact Storage Room 3; it provided him with everything he needed - shelving for his books, a desk to work at, an extra chair for any student needing help... But if there was one thing he had envied Carrol, it was his spacious office with its view across the campus grounds.

He glanced around it appreciatively as he went in, Dawn Meadows close behind him. As she slipped the office key into her pocket, she gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry - I have to stay with you; it wasn't my choice."

"Edwards is probably scared I'll run away with that nice ornate desk," Blair said, keeping his voice light with a touch of humor in it. "Seriously, I know you have better things to do than police my movements, so I'll be as quick as possible."

"Why doesn't the Chancellor trust you?" Dawn asked. "Do you even know?"

"I'd guess it's the general look - long hair, an earring, casual clothes rather than a suit... She probably grew up with parents who automatically assumed that any male with long hair had to be up to no good, with no morals worth mentioning, probably a drug habit, no sense of decency or respect for authority, an earring automatically meant gay... and of course 'gay' meant no morals worth mentioning, probably a drug habit... "

"Huh!" Dawn muttered. "In that case her father was either a saint or was damned good at hiding his little indiscretions."

"That's cynical," Blair said softly.

"The voice of experience," she replied. "Why do you think I'm still single? After the way I saw my father behave... he wasn't as careful about hiding things from me as he was with Mom. I know I should have told her, but it would have broken her heart... Eventually it did - when she contracted HIV from him. The AIDS killed her before it killed him... I suspect because she lost the will to live. I keep thinking, if I'd told her, she might have left him before some tramp infected him - but how can I know for sure? She loved the bastard, might have been willing to put up with his affairs just to have a little of his attention..."

"I know some men - like you - that I believe I could trust, but after the way I saw my father behave, I'll never put my happiness into the hands of any man."

Blair looked at her, then said quietly, "Growing up with a single Mom who didn't - or wouldn't or maybe couldn't - tell me who my father was... and who, I have to admit, played the field - the longest I think she ever stayed with anyone was about six months... Let's just say I know where you're coming from. I'm not entirely sure I could ever totally trust any woman to stay with me, to stay faithful to me, for more than a few months. I've not lived celibate, but I make sure that anyone I go out with knows the score - and I know she's just in it to have a good time. Either that or we're just two friends enjoying a meal and a movie together, the same way I might have a night out with a male friend."

Dawn nodded. "So if you were to ask me out... "

"It would be as a friend, no romance involved." Blair moved over to the desk. "I imagine the paperwork for the borrowed artifacts will be in one of these drawers." He deliberately injected a brisk, businesslike tone into his voice as he changed the subject.

As he crossed to it, he actively registered what he had already noticed; piled neatly in one corner was the packaging the various replicas had arrived in. Carrol had, Blair knew, been surprisingly parsimonious in some respects; where some professors threw out the packaging borrowed artifacts arrived in and simply requisitioned more when the items had to be returned, Carrol always kept as much as possible to reuse. Was that part of his basic insecurity? Feeling that he would be valued less if his expense sheet came to more than zero most months?

He opened the top drawer and immediately saw what he was looking for. He took the sheets of paper out of the drawer, closed it and said, "The easiest way to check all this is go down to the display room and check everything against what's there. You won't need to waste time watching me do that, will you?"

"I don't *need* to, but bearing in mind what you said about being able to alibi each other... If I'm there, nobody would be able to suggest that you took something, maybe to 'prove' you were right about something being missing."

"I hear that," Blair murmured, unoffended if only because he realized she was right. Edwards was quite capable of accusing him of doing just that.

They headed down to the display room, pausing only long enough for Dawn to relock the office door.

In the display room, Dawn shivered. "This room... "

"Feels weird, somehow, doesn't it?" Blair murmured. "It's a combination of things. The murder of someone you knew and to some extent worked with, actually seeing the body, a subconscious awareness that the killer is probably someone you know... "

"It's only partly that. It's the... the... "

"The premeditation? The callousness of killing Stuart and locking his body in the closet, so that the police would think he'd killed Carrol and done a runner? I know. There are a lot of things involved.

"Now, I'm sure it's one of the Chimu artifacts that's missing, but I'd better check everything against these lists... "

It didn't take him long to go through everything. Eventually he was left with eight pieces that weren't listed anywhere, that he assumed were Carrol's own, none of which matched the one item on the list from Washington State University that wasn't there.

"Got it," he said. "Replica of a small gold beaker with a face and pattern incised, and inlaid with turquoise." He sighed. "I suppose I'd better go and tell the Chancellor. She's going to love me even less when I do, but she has to know; Washington could sue Rainier for quite a bit over the loss, even though the thing won't cost that much -

relatively speaking - to re-replicate, and the insurance will cover that; either their own insurance or the insurance taken out for the loan. But she has to be told, to be prepared for that."

"I'll come with you - I'm your witness, after all."

"Thanks." Blair knew that Edwards wouldn't be happy about Dawn's backing him - she'd prefer to assume that Blair was trying to make himself seem important. But it would let him get away from Edwards relatively quickly, so that he could report the missing item to the police. Though before he went, he had to tidy up that last display shelf...

It only took a few minutes; out of respect for Carrol's preferences, he put one of the pieces he thought were Carrol's into a drawer in a small cabinet in the closet, leaving an even number on the shelf, and then he led the way out of the room, Dawn locking it behind them, and set off for the Chancellor's office.

He was right - Edwards was far from pleased, but there was really very little she could say. He pointed out that he had to get the details of the missing piece to the police as soon as possible, and escaped inside five minutes.

As they walked down the corridor away from Edwards' office, Dawn said wryly, "A boss who takes things like this theft and killing so personally should be an asset, with her staff knowing that she's backing them every step of the way - and yet Edwards is the exact opposite; she's just annoyed about it, afraid that she'll be blamed even though I doubt she was ever anywhere near Professor Carrol's display."

"And wanting to find someone to take the heat," Blair agreed. "In this case me, partly because I'm the one who brought the theft to her attention, partly because she doesn't like me and would have been glad to drop the responsibility for it onto me. Such a pity I have a good alibi for my movements on Monday night... "

"But what I don't understand... " Dawn said slowly, "is why steal a replica of something? If it had been the real thing, yes - the real thing surely has to be worth a lot of money, to sell to a private collector for example."

"Yeah - unless someone at Washington State U boobed and accidentally sent us the real thing instead of the replica, and instead of owning up to it and doing a swap, decided to cover his ass with murder."

"Is that likely?" She sounded startled.

Blair grinned. "It'd make a good plot for a story, but no, I wouldn't think it likely. The original is safely tucked away in a vault, and we've been sent the replica that they had on display somewhere in their archaeology department."

He left Dawn at her office, and headed for the parking lot.

At the PD, he went first to Major Crime, although he knew that technically he should have gone straight to Homicide. Jim looked up as Blair approached his desk. "Find what you were looking for?"

"More accurate to say identified what's missing. A gold beaker - hard to put a specific value on the original, but in a secret auction to selected collectors you'd be talking a lot of money. In open auction you'd pay up to... oh, maybe \$15000 for something relatively rare but legal, though prices under \$1000 are more common; for something really rare and *not* on the open market - that is, in secret auctions - the sky's the limit. Doesn't matter to them that they're the only ones who'll ever see it; it's theirs, to gloat over. It's not even necessarily that they like the thing or are interested in its history; it's... well... "

"Their proof to themselves of how wealthy and powerful they are?" Jim asked. "They've outbid everyone else for it, probably paid well over the odds... Would someone like that know enough not to bid on a fake, if they were told it was genuine?"

"Probably yes, as long as they can actually inspect it," Blair said. "These guys know gold plate from solid gold, for example, and they wouldn't be fooled for an instant by anything like a copper alloy that had nothing going for it but the proper color. And if they weren't given the chance to inspect it - they'd either not bid, or if they did then discovered they'd been cheated... well, the seller could expect a very short life."

They went down to Homicide, finding both Roger Tamlin and John Cox at their desks. Blair reported quickly, and Roger nodded. "Do you have a picture of it?"

"No, but if you give me access to your computer... "

"Be my guest."

Blair sat at the computer, called up Google, then started typing. A page came up; he went down it and clicked on the fifth item. A screenful of thumbnails popped into view; he scrolled down for a moment, then stopped and clicked on one of the thumbnails. "I don't think the missing piece is identical to that, but it fits the same general description."

"You said it was borrowed from Washington State University."

"Yes; specifically the Seattle campus. I did suggest to Chancellor Edwards that she let Washington know."

"It is primarily her responsibility," Roger agreed. "But I think I need to contact them as well, and the Seattle police too, because the perp could have come from there. But

the first thing I have to do is talk to your fellow TA, the one who wasn't there yesterday. Can you tell me, is he at Rainier today?"

"Mike? Yes - I saw him first thing. He'd heard some gossip while he was walking from the parking lot and asked me what had happened; I gave him a quick run down, and told him to contact you and he said he would. He was giving an early lecture, but he could at least have phoned you right away to arrange a time." Blair stiffened. "Wait a minute - he told me he was in Seattle yesterday."

"He was?" Roger asked. "Did he say why?"

"Visiting relatives. Then we went our separate ways, and I went to check the artifacts... "

"Did he know you were going to do that?"

"Yes... "

Roger reached for the phone with one hand and opened a desk drawer with the other. He took out a card, checked it and punched in a number.

"Hello. This is Detective Tamlin, Cascade PD. Can you tell me - is Mike - " He glanced at Blair.

"Mike Leaman."

"Is Mike Leaman available? He might be giving a lecture." He listened for a moment. "I see... " He reached for a pen. "Can you give me his address and phone number, please." He scribbled on a pad. "Thank you." He glanced at Blair. "He went home before his first lecture, complaining about feeling ill."

"That can't have been long after I saw him, and he certainly didn't look ill then," Blair muttered as Roger began to dial a number. He hung up after a minute. "No answer."

"So unless he was feeling ill enough to go to the hospital... " Blair muttered.

"Looks suspicious, doesn't it. Blair - from your knowledge of him... is he capable of killing?" Roger asked.

Blair thought for a moment. "I'm not sure. We get on well enough together, but... I don't know... he isn't someone I ever wanted to socialize with, and I'm not sure why. He's never done or said anything to make me actually distrust him, but there's something... "

"I'd trust your instincts any day," Jim murmured.

Blair gave him a weak grin. "In that case... I'd say that if the motive were strong enough, yes, I think he could kill."

"You don't happen to have a phone number for the Seattle campus?" Roger asked.

"No, but it's easy enough to Google it."

Roger nodded, but instead picked up the phone. "Switchboard? I want the Seattle police, please. Robbery." There was a short silence. "Hello. Yes - we've had a theft here..." He went on to explain the circumstances, then - "What? But that - Yes, yes of course." He glanced over at the others, one hand over the mouthpiece of the phone, and said quickly, "There's been a murder at the Seattle campus. The body was found this morning beside a display case of South American artifacts. He'd been shot." Then removing his hand from the mouthpiece, he said, "Yes, sir. Yes, that's right. A Rainier professor recently borrowed several artifacts from various institutions, including the Seattle campus of WSU, for a display he was setting up. Yesterday morning both the professor and one of his student assistants were found dead. It could have been long enough before anyone realized that there was an item missing, but another assistant knew enough to suspect that something had been taken. We got him to check the items there against the lists of what had been borrowed, and he found one item on the Seattle list that wasn't in any of the display cases; a replica of an item Seattle might have had the original of - a gold beaker set with turquoise... Yes, I agree; it would be surprising if the deaths weren't linked in some way. Yes, I'll continue with my investigation here, and let you know if I discover anything... Yes. Thank you." He put the phone down.

"The dead man in Seattle was one of the university maintenance staff," he said.

"Who would be in a perfect position to get access to what we could call the vaults," Blair said. "I wonder... I'm reluctant to think it of him, but I'm beginning to wonder if Mike and someone in Seattle had some sort of plan to steal the original beaker, leaving the replica in the vault in its place - nobody much would be going in there unless they were going in to check on a specific item, and it's not often that would happen. It could be years before that kind of substitution was noticed."

"But why?" Roger asked. "What would the thief do with it?"

"Roger, something like that is worth thousands - hundreds of thousands - in the right market," Blair said.

It was lunch time; Jim and Blair went to a nearby diner for a meal, and then Blair accompanied Jim back to Major Crime; he had no need to go back to Rainier that day. He tried to put the question of the missing replica out of his mind, but found it impossible, and he was coming more and more around to the feeling that Mike knew something about it. Yet what could he know? Blair had watched him leaving Rainier -

But there was nothing to say that Mike hadn't driven two or three hundred yards down the road, turned once he was sure Blair had left Rainier's parking lot and gone back. Though how had he managed to overcome and strangle two perfectly fit

men? If he had wanted to steal one of the artifacts, wouldn't it have been simpler to have waited until Stuart and Carrol left, and then gone back in? By seven, when he and Mike had left, the secretaries had all gone, there would have been nobody to see him take the key...

And if he had waited, there would have been no need to get hold of a key for the walk-in closet. No need to find a red herring 'suspect'.

Or... had the theft of the replica been in itself a cover? Had the real crime been the killing of one or other of the two men? And if so, why?

Yet if it *had* been Mike... as he had said, he normally worked with Dr Harding, whose TA he was; he had certainly, at one time, been a student of Carrol's, but that had been at least two years previously. Had he harbored a grudge against Carrol for those years, which he had finally decided to satisfy? Had Stuart simply been collateral damage - or no; with his body locked in that closet, Stuart had been set up as a fall guy, the missing suspect everyone would search for.

But there was also the dead man in Seattle. How was he involved?

Had the idea been to swap the replica for the original in the vault? A maintenance man would have been a good partner for that, because he would know how to gain access... But if so, something must have gone terribly wrong with their plan.

Blair frowned. He was beginning to wonder... Mike hadn't answered his phone, and a patrol car had been sent to his address. Was he going to be found there, dead?

The bullpen door opened abruptly, swung and slammed against the wall. Every head turned, drawn by the noise. Blair got to his feet.

"Mike!"

His fellow student rushed to him, caught his arms. "Blair! You've got to help me! You've got to help me!"

"All right," Blair said quietly, trying to calm the frantic man by remaining controlled. "What's the problem?"

"They killed Bruce... last night. I just managed to get away... I don't think I've ever driven as fast, broken as many speed limits... but I think they followed me, know where I live..."

"Hold it!" Blair said. "Who's Bruce? Who are 'they'?"

Jim joined them as Mike said, "Bruce... Bruce is - was - my cousin. He... He worked at the Seattle campus of WSU."

"Maintenance?"

"Yes - how do you know that?"

"We got the report of a dead man at Seattle, though I didn't hear his name. So what happened?"

"Hold on," Jim said. "Let's take this to an interview room, and get Detective Tamlin in on it." He glanced across the room. "Rafe, call Homicide and get Roger Tamlin to join us in one of the interview rooms. Let him know Mike has turned up."

"On it," Rafe replied, reaching for the phone as Jim and Blair began to lead Mike out.

Interview room six was empty, and Blair took Mike into it while Jim waited in the corridor for Roger. Inside, Mike said, "I'm sorry, Blair. Nobody was supposed to get hurt... let alone killed."

"Okay," Blair said. "Salvage what you can from the situation, but whatever you do, don't lie about anything. These guys didn't make detective without being able to read people, and read them well." He indicated a chair. "Have a seat."

Mike sank into it as Jim and Roger entered.

Roger took charge immediately. "Mike Leaman?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you contact me this morning after you spoke to Blair?"

"I was going to... but then I saw... I saw... "

"Yes?"

"One of the men who killed Bruce." His voice broke. "I knew I'd be next."

"And Bruce is - ?"

"My cousin. Bruce Leaman."

"So what did you do?"

"I ran... but he saw me and followed me. I... I managed to get away from him, tried to go back home, but one of the others had beaten me to it. That was when I decided to come here... "

"And why did they kill Bruce?" Roger asked. "Why do they want to kill you?"

"They thought we were cheating them - but we weren't!" There was a sort of righteous indignation in his voice.

"I see... Perhaps you'd better start at the beginning... which would be Monday night?"

"Actually a few weeks ago," Mike said. "When Seattle agreed to lend Rainier some replica artifacts. They had the originals of several of them. Bruce... Bruce had the idea of swapping one of the replicas with its original, so that the original was sent here."

Blair nodded to himself. That matched one of his suppositions perfectly.

"So few people bother checking what's in the vaults, it could have been years before the substitution was discovered. Then Bruce would come to Cascade, together we'd go to Rainier - I think he only involved me because he didn't know his way around Rainier - steal the item, and take it back to Seattle where he had found a buyer for it. Bruce had several skeleton keys, because he needed access to a lot of the rooms at Seattle; he brought them so that we'd be able to get into the display room without having to bother trying to get the proper key.

"I thought Carrol and Stuart would be away by the time we got there - it was after nine - but they weren't. Carrol got quite obnoxious about me going back and 'bringing someone with me to get a preview of the display'. He was... pretty insulting; Bruce lost his temper and attacked him, strangled him. Stuart... He tried to run away; I grabbed him, meaning to get him to promise to say nothing, but then Bruce came and strangled him too. That was when we had the idea to lock his body in the closet - one of Bruce's keys worked although the lock was pretty stiff."

"So the killing wasn't premeditated?" Roger asked.

"No. OK, if Bruce hadn't lost his temper and killed them, I wouldn't have been able to come back, but we'd have had three quarters of a million between us; enough to last us all our lives as long as we didn't waste money. We went back to Seattle, and Bruce contacted his buyer. We met up with him and a couple of his men in the display room at the campus on Tuesday night - I think he might have had the idea that we could steal some more to order, because outside somewhere would have been safer. The guy took the beaker, checked it over and promptly accused us of trying to cheat him by passing off the replica as the genuine thing. But the one we'd given him was definitely the one from the vault... "

"Someone had had the same idea a while ago, and swapped a replica for the real thing?" Blair asked.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Mike agreed. "I didn't like the way things were going; he wasn't listening to Bruce, just kept saying that nobody cheated him. Anyone who tried paid the price. I started backing away - well, it was between him and Bruce, I was just the guy Bruce had persuaded to help him - and I was at the door when he shot Bruce. I just ran. Got out, got to my car and took off. But I saw another car start after me.

"I thought - hoped - I'd got clean away when I didn't see a car keeping pace with me while I drove back to Cascade, but like I said, I saw one of the men this morning

and panicked; I couldn't get my car, and tried to get home by bus, but when I got off it I saw another of the men watching my apartment, and spent several hours just running around trying to decide what to do. Eventually I realized I had to come here... Had to come clean. I didn't actually do anything - I just backed up Bruce."

He sounded pathetic. It was undoubtedly the truth, but he sounded pathetic.

"Did you hear a name?" Roger asked.

"Bruce called the man Mr. Costello."

"And met him in Seattle?"

"I don't think he met him anywhere else."

"Right - thank you, Mr. Leaman," Roger said. "I'm not arresting you at this time, but you may have to stand trial as an accomplice in the murders of Professor Carrol and Mr. McColl."

"But... where can I go? They know where I live!"

"I'll arrange for you to be taken to a safe house," Roger said.

It didn't take long to arrange, and Mike left the PD in the company of a young Patrol officer. They were halfway to the car when a shot rang out, and Mike fell. Several cops ran from the building, drawn by the shot, as the officer escorting Mike phoned for an ambulance. But it was too late. Mike Leaman was dead.

Roger gave his report to his own Captain and also to Seattle, but the name 'Costello' produced no leads. Either Costello had gone to Seattle from somewhere else, or he had used a false name, and there was no longer anyone alive who could identify him. The case went cold.

"And the hell of it is," Blair commented as he and Jim headed home, "because this Costello seems to have kept the Chimu beaker and it can't be checked for authenticity - was he simply using the excuse of 'cheating and selling a replica' to kill the thieves and get it for nothing?"

"It's not impossible," Jim said. "The saying is that there's honor among thieves, but really it's more often the other way - there's no honor among thieves."

"And he who sups with the devil needs a very long spoon," Blair agreed. "I know I didn't totally trust Mike... but really, all he was doing was helping his cousin. It's Bruce Leaman who was the dishonest one. Mike paid a high price for family loyalty."

All Jim could do was nod his agreement.