



by unbelievable2
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PART 1

**...What a nice surprise
Bring your alibis...**

The conversation was by now going down a predictable route.

"I'm just saying, Chief, they could've picked a better weekend."

"Jim, this festival was planned months in advance! And anyway, how can anyone predict the weather? You're not averse to a little inclement weather when we're camping, buddy. All this is just because you're regretting agreeing to come with me!"

"No, it's just because it's only minutes ago you 'fessed up to the fact we have to stay in a goddamn tipi! Not only that, you had the gall to take the tent out of the truck where I'd put it, without telling me!"

"Of course we have to stay in a tipi – no question. What else would we be staying in? A Winnebago? You have to go in the right spirit, Jim! This is such an important area! It's full of centuries of history of the Native American peoples, and it's the first time in years that the old festival is going to be held again. Not many outsiders are being invited. We're really lucky that they're happy for us to come along and be part of it."

"Why couldn't we have been part of that and take our normal tent? I'm used to our tent! I like our tent! I really don't like the idea of sharing a large, smoky tipi with twelve other people. I don't like the idea of all that communal cooking. And I don't want hundreds of other people in my face! I get enough of that in my day job!"

"Come on, Jim, lighten up! This is going to be an authentic experience. Not to mention using our own tent would be insulting to our hosts. Look, it'll be so great for you to get back to nature, to soak up all the important vibes from the forest and the mountains. It'll calm you from the stress of all the work you're doing right now. And, you know, all the work I'm doing, too. It's a real opportunity to switch off and just be at one with the universe, and take inspiration from the stories and histories of the people we're visiting with. I remember, when I was with the Oglala Sioux..."

"You were never with the Oglala Sioux, Sandburg!"

"I so was! Sure, we were on the Plains, and the stories and the traditions there were kind of different, but it was still a wonderful experience. It's something that I've kept with me all my life. It's informed my work as an anthropologist. Hell, it inspired me!"

"And you were how old, exactly?"

"Well, I was...um... five, but – you know - I was inquisitive for my age..."

"My point exactly."

"Your point exactly what?"

"My point is that you don't have a clue what you're talking about. It's going to be an uncomfortable experience, that's what. On top of all the weird stuff you've been feeding me in the last few days."

"Those were authentic north-western nations dishes, Jim. The kind of things we're going to be eating. They were to prepare us for observing the rituals that are going to take place at this wonderful Festival. Anyway, you said you liked them."

"Well, yeah, they were okay, I guess. It was just that tea you made me drink. That Yerba latté, it tasted weird, I'm not sure it's really settled well on my stomach."

"What do you mean '*latté*'? That's '*maté*'! It's an herbal tea – you don't add milk to it! Please don't tell me you added milk to it?"

"Of course I added milk to it, it was the only way I could face drinking it. It sure tasted weird, Chief."

"Well, it's got God knows how many amazing South American herbs in it, to invigorate and energise you, but I'm really not sure you should have added milk to it. I don't think the lactose

would react well to the herbal mixture. Are you feeling okay? Is that why you're in such a bad mood?"

"I'm not in a bad mood, Chief, I'm in a normal mood."

"Okay, well, a crappier mood than usual, then?"

"I think I'm in a real good mood considering I've had to listen to you yammering on for the last three hours about Native American legends, pausing only once we'd got past the point of no return to tell me I'm staying in a goddamn tipi!"

"Glad to see you learning to embrace change, Jim. Anyway, come on! You're not going to tell me you weren't interested in those stories? This is an amazing place we're going to! It's got such resonance for the north-west peoples, all the different families and tribes living in this region. White settlers might have called it Indian Heaven, but it has more than the glorious scenery, you wait and see! It's packed full of legend and folklore and mysticism. And once a year there would be this magical ceremony to celebrate when people would harvest all the huckleberries to help see them through the winter. These were berries that the Creator God first planted long, long ago..."

"Chief, much as I love your tales of the past, we're running into the worst storm so far this autumn, and, in case you've forgotten, we haven't got any decent camping gear in the truck."

"I told you, the tipi will be fine!"

"Right, okay, the tipi will be fine."

"Jim, relax your jaw. Anyway, there's another story I haven't told you about. Have you heard about the Wendigo? No? Well, the Wendigo is creature that comes from the legends of many peoples in the northern part of the country. Mainly in the eastern states, I guess, but native people moved west over the centuries and I'm sure they would have brought their legends with them. Yeah, yeah, I think that's a reasonable hypothesis. And of course there are similar sorts of stories told by the coastal tribes.... You still listening, Jim?"

"I'm listening, Sandburg. What choice do I have?"

"Okay, so the Wendigo - some people say it's a spirit that inhabits a man - turns him into a ravening cannibal. But others say that the Wendigo exists to show people the dangers of getting out of balance with things - such as wasting food so that later you starve. The Wendigo brings ice and snow with it, breaking trees and freezing mountains. And if it finds you, then you could die of fright, which would be the easy way out, because it's going to tear you apart and consume every last scrap of....."

"You don't say? Well, thanks for that, Chief. You're really making this weekend sound more and more fun."

"Hey, Jim! It's only a story right?"

"Yeah? Aren't you the one who's always telling me that these ancient stories have more than a grain of truth and history about them? Or was it that other anthropologist who makes my life a misery?"

"Har har. Knowing me enriches your life, Ellison, and don't you forget it!"



"Yeah, Sandburg, like manure. Anyway, it's a weird thing you should mention it, but you know, over the last year or so there have been a number of disappearances in these forests. Sometimes cars are found without their occupants, sometimes it's just hikers that failed to get back from the trail. These things have always happened, I guess, out in the wilds, but recently there seems to be more of a pattern - a regularity - about them. And I know this because the PD has been asked to help by the Skamania County police. Simon told me just before we checked out of the Department. Rumour has it, it's something that's going to fall to Major Crimes to handle. Vancouver and Portland say they're over-stretched."

"They're over-stretched? Well, God forbid it lands on our plate! Haven't we got enough to do already?"

"Hey, it's simple, Sandburg. We'll just tell Simon the Wendigo did it."

"Don't joke about these things, Jim! These might be folktales, but like I keep telling you - and you just said it yourself - in every culture, they're rooted in reality!"

"The only reality about these forests, Sandburg, is that we're gonna get good and wet camping this weekend. If we ever get up there, that is. Shouldn't we have hit the turnoff by now?"

"We hit the turnoff. We turned off about twenty minutes ago."

"What, the turnoff for the County road?"

"No, the turnoff to the right. You said we needed to turn off to the right."

"At the right 'right'! Who's got the goddamn map, Sandburg?"

"Yeah, okay, I've got the map but that was the turning you took."

"Only because you pointed and said 'right there'".

"Did I? Are you sure? I mean, you sure I wasn't just saying 'you're right there, Jim'?"

"So help me..... how the hell do I know what you were saying at the time, Sandburg? How do I know what you're saying most of the time?"

"Sticks and stones, Jim."

"Well, just feel lucky there aren't any of those to hand right now, Darwin. Find us on the map."

"Okay, switch the light on... Yeah, okay, okay, I think I've got us. Okay, if we carry on up this road we might be able to double-back again via a logging road in, maybe, ten miles or so."

"Ten miles! It'll be dark by the time we get there! Dark and wet..."

"Well, you work it out, O Great Sentinel!"

"I have heightened senses, Professor, thanks a lot, but not a goddamn integrated GPS."

And so on. And so forth.

The truck wound up the increasingly rocky track which snaked through dark pine forest, climbing all the time. Surrounding them on every side, the forest crowded in, and in the distance were the mighty volcanic peaks which bounded the area; some dead, some just slumbering. Not that they could enjoy the view; the rain was now falling in earnest, and although it was only early evening, the sky was dark with the storm clouds all around them, and the wind was growing in strength.

Which was a pity, as this trip was a kind of delayed celebration. It had been a difficult few months, both professionally and personally, for the both of them, but now, professionally at least, things were different. Blair's doctorate had been secured – as much to do with Sandburg's brilliance in producing an apparently brand new dissertation out of thin air (though Jim knew it was something he'd been keeping in the bottom drawer, so to speak) as it was down political manoeuvring in both Rainier and the PD.

Blair's new position in the PD as Consultant had officially cemented their working partnership and everything should have been rosy, but they had had no time to bask in their own glory. The work had suddenly started piling on in the PD, to a ridiculous degree, plus the conditions

of Blair's link with Rainier meant that his continuing academic commitments, however reduced they had become, eroded any free time he might have had. And although Jim would never have admitted it, their strange domestic symbiosis had meant that the more Blair had had to work, the more Jim took on at the PD, rather than kick his heels alone somewhere. Consequently, they were both exhausted.

They had insisted on this vacation, and their captain had grudgingly concurred, but the PD managed to put a final spoke in their wheel. They hadn't planned to leave Cascade in the early afternoon – they should have been on the road by six – but their case-load of the last weeks and the absence of anyone with free time on whom they could off-load some of their paperwork meant that they had had to take an extra morning out of their long-booked leave. Even then, Simon was glowering at them and muttering dark imprecations as they had slunk out of Major Crime just after 2 pm.

It hadn't been an auspicious start to the journey, both of them feeling a little guilty about leaving their colleagues behind, even though they knew that some time off was desperately needed. With that weighing on their minds, and with the journey growing increasingly difficult in the heavy rain and mud, the conversation, such as it was, settled into a brooding, tetchy silence on both sides.

The truck negotiated a particularly nasty corner, the forest rising high above them on one side and falling away into blackness on the other, and Jim's testy sigh at the rocky ascent in front of them was audible over the drumming of the rain on the roof. Blair was contemplating at what point he should offer to get out and get drenched guiding them in a treacherous inch-by-inch turn, when Jim gave a cry and clutched at his ears, a loud bang sounding from beneath the chassis.

There was no time for Blair to worry about what was ailing his friend. Driverless for a fraction of a second until Blair grabbed at the wheel, the vehicle bucked and slithered in the mud, the cliff edge an uncomfortably small distance away from the truck's wayward tyres. Cursing, Jim caught hold of the wheel again and between them they grappled with the steering for a few hairy seconds before the truck came to a sluggish stop.

Jim reached across Blair to grab the flashlight from the glove-box and leapt out, Blair sliding hurriedly after him. By the time Blair's feet were steady on the stony track and he was gauging nervously the margin between them and eternity as the edge of the track dropped away over the cliff, Jim was already inspecting the underside of the truck. Blair could see the rain pouring off his cap and shoulders. He hunched his own coat around his ears and crouched supportively on the ground next to his friend.

"Are you okay, man? Your hearing....?"

Jim waved a hand impatiently at him, so Blair tried another tack.

"A flat?"

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock." The reply was bitter. "Only fifty percent right."

Blair stared in disbelief at the drooping chassis. The front two tyres were shredded.

"Two? Two blow-outs? How the heck...?"

"Yep, our luck keeps getting better and better this weekend." Jim's voice was muffled by his collar. "I could use the spare but there's nothing I can do for the other one. We'll have to walk back to the main road and see if we can hitch a lift to a repair shop somewhere. But not in this rain. And since we don't have our tent...." - he shot Blair a significant look - "...you'd better prepare yourself for a night in the cab, Sandburg."

Jim straightened up, Blair copying his movements and still hovering guiltily.

"Weird two tyres should blow out like that, huh?"

Jim gestured around.

"The track is pretty rough. But I'm disappointed in those tyres. They should have held out against worse than that. Though you know, from the look of them..." he looked round vaguely "...it's almost like they were... I dunno ... like a stinger got them."

"Like the PD pursuit stingers? The ones we put down to shred tyres at a roadblock?" Blair looked from side to side. "On this track? That can't be right, Jim."

But Jim was already striding back twenty yards, the torch-beam playing on the glistening rocks. Blair trotted after him, trying to ignore the rivulets of rain coursing down his scalp and beneath his collar. Jim halted sharply and crouched down by some boulders. Blair hunched down next to him.

"What've you got, Jim?"

"Look, there's some electronic gizmo. I could hear a whine back there, and tracked it to here. I'm pretty sure I can hear another one buzzing from that pine over there on the other side. Could it be...? I dunno.... a kind of electronic trip-wire? A high-frequency signal to make the tyres blow? Anyway, I've never heard of anything like that in use by us."

"An electronic signal? Is that what made you yell, back there? Dammit, are you okay, man? I mean, that would have been one intense blast of sound, to rip those tyres apart. How do you feel?"

Jim shook his head dismissively.

"Oh, it hurt, all right, but I'm fine now. But if this is what happened, it's a new device, some kind of new technology."

"Could sound actually do that? Blow out tyres?"

Jim looked at him reproachfully.

"I don't know how the damned thing works! How the hell could I?"

"But your senses - couldn't you tell..."

"Oh, can it, Sandburg! I heard a blast of sound when the thing fired - a screech and then the explosion - nothing before then. There was no way I could have heard this thing buzzing before we got here, not least because of this goddamn rain you arranged for our trip. "

"Okay, okay..." Blair held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm sorry about the weather, about the tyres, about my mere existence at this point..."

Jim made a face at him, barely visible in the streaming rain, then suddenly froze, his head cocked, listening.

"Jim...?"

"Ssshhh.... You hear that?"

Blair shut his mouth and strained his hearing over the steady hammering of the rain on the pines and the undergrowth. But he could hear nothing untoward, other than the wind roaring in the trees, or at least it must have been the wind - there was a strange, animalistic howl to it.

The temperature, already uncomfortable, was plummeting. The rushing of the pines intensified around them, and he was suddenly, inexplicably, afraid.

He glanced at Jim in consternation. His friend's handsome profile was oddly highlighted in the beam of the flashlight. He looked tense, and wary.

"Jim..."

Jim raised a hand as if to warn him again to be quiet, but then suddenly shook himself, turned to Blair and gave him a wry look.

"Tricky weather, Chief. Come on, back to the truck. Maybe the rain will ease by morning."

Jim's voice had changed - no longer purely irritated, but now with the timbre that Blair had learned to associate with times when the Sentinel in Jim was alerted to a threat against them both. Blair felt Jim's hand insistent at his back as he hurried him towards the truck. Retreat was just fine for Blair, still feeling uneasy even though the roaring wind had dissipated somewhat. The feeling of dread had not entirely left him, and he was embarrassingly glad to get back to their refuge.

He cast his eyes over the dark mountainside that had been at their backs all this while. The soaring ranks of trees were only slightly darker than the low clouds which, still heavy with rain, brushed their tips with mist. He grabbed Jim's sleeve.

"Look! There are lights up there! Hey, how come we missed seeing that earlier? Ranger station, maybe?"

Jim's gaze followed his pointing finger.

"Don't remember one on the map. But it looks like a building, sure, and with quite a lot of lights on it."

Blair smiled privately. Jim's casual application of his sentinel abilities never failed to thrill him, and it was especially pleasing that, these days, Jim seemed to be much more accepting of their presence.

"Well, maybe we could ask them for help," Blair persisted. Anything to get out of this rain...

Jim naturally hesitated. Blair had lived half his life on the kindness of relative strangers, but Jim's upbringing had taught him to mistrust putting himself in anyone's debt. It was a hard habit break. He got out his cell-phone.

"Let's see if I can tell Simon where we are, at least."

The cell-phone glowed in the dim light. A signal registered, but one so weak, and so oddly distorted, it wouldn't dial a number. The weather won.

"Okay, okay, we might as well go up there. Let's get the back-packs."

Blair was already on the case, very happy at the prospect of getting out of the weather and this oddly menacing forest. Wilderness had never bothered him like this before, and in fact it wasn't the black pines and darkness that were disturbing. It was the strange, brooding presence that seemed to be somewhere in the background. This was a rare occasion when he cursed his fertile imagination, fuelled as it was by an encyclopaedic knowledge of superstitions from just about every world culture, so many the product of wildwood just like this.



He fixed his eyes on the broad, water-proofed back of Cascade's finest as Jim trudged up the track in front of him. Now they had seen the lights high up the hillside, it had been easy to guess that a wide side-track off the rough roadway ahead of the stranded truck was the

property's driveway. This was confirmed by the fact that, as they climbed, lighting cunningly hidden in the trees on each side flickered into life, illuminating their wet and squelching way.

Jim had given this development wary consideration, coupled with looks at Blair that could have been summed up as "*look what you've landed us in this time*". The object of his disaffection tried his best to lighten the damp atmosphere; a pretty hopeless task, except Blair needed his own bit of bravado to bolster his continued nervousness.

"Hey, Jim, kinda spooky, all this, huh?"

No answer.

"What's that Eagles song? You know it, you're the fan. The stranded traveller at the loony hotel?"

Jim's voice was muffled, his back still turned to Blair.

"Hotel California. You know that. And it was set in a desert, not a rainforest...."

Blair persisted.

"Yeah, but you know how it goes?" He started singing, a little off-key. "*Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light. My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim...*"

"Enough, Pavarotti!"

"Well, remember how well *that* ended, man. Maybe this is the Hotel Cascadia!"

Jim's reply to his weak joke was full of weary resignation.

"The way my luck is going, Sandburg, I won't be surprised if this is a new branch of the Bates Motel."

PART 2

...Her mind is Tiffany-twisted, she got the Mercedes bends...

What did surprise both of them was the blaze of light that greeted them as they rounded the last bend in the track and saw the house perched on the hillside, its upper balcony jutting out into the forest. Most of the walls seemed to be windows, some lighted, some not, and the overall design was spare, elegant and angular, all steel joists and wood beams. At ground level, two large Landcruisers were parked. A doorway slid open, apparently automatically.

"Come in! Come in!"

A figure advanced towards them bearing a large golfing umbrella. The man beneath its dome was a trim individual, in his fifties most like, in smartly pressed chinos and shirt; both were being splashed darkly by the rain. He wore a neat beard, wire glasses and a welcoming smile.

"I am so sorry! It's all our fault, your vehicle problems! Please, come in and shelter. We'll get it sorted out for you, Detective Ellison!"

Jim took the proffered hand and accepted the firm handshake but his frown deepened.

"How did you know...." he began, but the man had already moved on to Blair with a similarly friendly handshake.

"Please, I'll explain all when we get inside. You must be soaked through. What terrible weather! I do believe the season is getting worse, you know."

The man ushered them through the wide doorway into a well-lit hall, all polished pine with a wide staircase curving up to the next floor. He shook out the huge umbrella with a flourish and closed it, shoving it into a stand by the doorway. He then brushed his hand across a panel by the door jamb and the door slid shut again.

The man pulled off his spectacles, polishing them quickly on a handkerchief to remove the rain drops, then squinted amiably at them in the warm light within the hallway. "Please, do let me take your wet things. Oh my goodness, I feel so embarrassed about this. It was our little toy on the track, you see. I'll explain it all in a moment."

Jim shrugged off his jacket and handed it over, a bit discomfited.

"Have we met, sir? You called me Detective Ellison."

The bearded man smiled.

"No sir, I have not had that pleasure. My name, by the way, is Burt Weston. The reason I know you are one of our fine law enforcement officers is down to another of our little toys out there."

Weston took Blair's similarly sodden jacket, hung it up and directed them through into an elegant lounge where a handsome woman, blonde hair piled high on her head, was stretched out on a couch. Nearby, a slightly-built teenager sat precisely on a chair, her back ramrod stiff, her expression placid and uninterested.

"And this," continued Burt Weston, "is my wife, Louise."

Louise Weston smiled up at Blair but her gaze swiftly and intently switched to Jim, and she extended her hand. After a fraction's pause, Blair stepped forward and took it in a light handshake.

"Blair Sandburg."

"Delighted to meet you, Blair," purred Louise, her eyes flickering only momentarily to Blair before fixing on Jim again. "Burt, you are such a klutz at introductions."

She stood up, brushing down her dress, and advanced on Jim.

"The trouble with scientists" she continued with an arch smile, "is that they can never keep their mind off their work for a minute. No time for etiquette! He should be making small talk, and all he wants to do is rattle on about our research out here."

Blair was clearly not prepared to be blanked so comprehensively. He raised his hands in apology.

"Hey, I'm just the same, Louise. Jim can barely get me to shut up."

"Oh, so you're a scientist, too?" asked Louise, with about as much interest as if she had asked "*is it still raining?*" and flicked a hand towards the girl on the chair.

"Julie, get a couple of beers for our guests." She turned again to Jim. "You two would like beers?"

Jim exchanged a glance with his friend. He saw Blair shrug slightly, and grin.

"We'd love a beer, thank you."

Blair moved toward the girl, hand extended and a bright smile on his face. Jim almost rolled his eyes, and then realised that Blair was making a point. The girl hadn't been introduced by either Weston.

"Hi, I'm Blair Sandburg! Pleased to meet you!"

The girl stopped dead, and looked at him expectantly.

"What's your name?" he prompted.

Before the girl could reply, Louise Weston took her arm and steered her towards what Jim assumed was the kitchen area.

"Oh, this is Julie," said Louise airily, "our niece. She's visiting from back east, but she's a bit shy, aren't you, baby?" She stroked her fingers up and down the girl's forearm, and Julie smiled at her, though it seemed rather an empty smile. "You'll get to know her better, later, I'm sure."

Julie left the room, and Louise directed her own rather lovely smile now at Blair.

"And so you're a scientist, are you, Blair? Our little scanner did pick up a pass card that mentioned Rainier University."

Blair did a double-take and looked at Jim in surprise.

"You saw that? How? What do you mean, exactly?"

"I'm guessing," broke in Jim, somewhat frostily, "that just as you have some kind of electronic gizmo on the road to act as a stinger, taking out tyres, you have a scanner somewhere on the track up here to check us for microchipped devices, such as ID cards. That right, Mr Weston?"

He turned to the bearded man, who grinned delightedly at his wife.

"Oh, I see we'll have to look to our laurels here, Louise. You are absolutely correct, detective."

"Some might say that's pretty anti-social behaviour, Mr Weston. In fact, probably criminal damage also."

"Oh, please call me Burt! Let me explain. We're testing some devices that we've developed, ironing out some glitches before we take them to potential buyers. We're so remote around here, we really didn't expect anyone on the road today and certainly not in this weather. So I left the acoustic stinger on the track without thinking. Very remiss of me, I absolutely agree. I do hope you'll accept our apologies. I'll do all in my power to get you on your way again as soon as practicable, Detective."

He looked quite plaintively at Jim, who, after a moment's pause, relaxed a little and nodded.

"Jim. And yes, I'm a detective with the Major Crimes division of Cascade PD. And this is Dr Blair Sandburg, who's a consultant on permanent secondment to the PD from Rainier, and my partner in the division."

"Permanent part-time secondment," broke in Blair, with a moue of discontent. "The trouble with universities is that once they've got you in their clutches, they never really want to let you go. So I still have some teaching commitments to fulfil, on top of all the PD work we do. Plus my own research, but that's kind of covered by working with Jim."

Jim made a face at him. "That's kind of impolite, Chief."

"Huh?"

"You make me sound like a lab rat."

Blair snorted with laughter but Jim saw that he'd caught his lapse. He continued with complete conviction for his audience's benefit.

"Oh! I don't mean Jim is my research subject. I'm an anthropologist by discipline. My broader work in the department is in looking at social structures in the city, and the hierarchical groups within institutions and the PD itself, hypothesising about how those could be best used for the benefit of law enforcement and...."

"Chief."

"Hmmm...?"

Blair looked at Jim and then at the Westons. Burt had been listening avidly to all the details; Louise looked on with an indulgent smile.

"TMI, Chief."

Blair, blushed, and finished up.

"But most of my work ends up being fighting crime with Jim, here, so maybe you can forgive me a lapse or two."

Louise gave a chuckle. "Yep, looks like scientists are like that the world over. You have my sympathy, Jim."

By now Julie had returned and the bottles were handed to the two men. They were invited to sit on the other couch, while Burt took a seat next to his wife and, rather touchingly, took her hand in his. Julie, meanwhile, took up her position on the chair, and her somewhat disengaged look, once again. She had no drink herself.

"Well, I'm pretty sure how you ended up getting a wrecked truck, gentlemen," began Burt, "but I'm a bit bemused about how you ended up in our little part of the world here, particularly so far away from home, so to speak. One of the reasons we bought this place is that we can seek out company when we want it, not the other way round. Not that you aren't entirely welcome," he added hurriedly.

"Well," chuckled Jim. "We're certainly sorry that we *did* end up here, as we were in fact aiming for the Huckleberry Festival, up in Indian Heaven. Somehow in the storm we ended up taking a wrong turning, and then once we were on the logging road, it got a little too treacherous to make a turn back in the conditions out there. So we thought we would try to push on through. Then we hit your stinger.... What the hell is that by the way?"

"Ah, our new baby. It uses high frequency sound to trigger a molecular reaction within in the tyre material. It's very simple to operate and much easier to set up on a roadway to hinder a perpetrator or create a road block than a conventional device. *In extremis*, two officers can hold the two parts of the device on opposite sides of the roadway, thus needing no time at all to apprehend a vehicle. We still have a few things to iron out of that one, but we hope to be taking it to market fairly soon, along with the ID checker that spotted your details earlier."

Burt gave his wife a fond smile.

"That, we hope, will have universal application to law enforcement, government and business. If someone is wearing some kind of named digital ID, or carrying something similar, like a credit card, the device can pick it up and relay it centrally for checking and tracking. Which is why we could see who you were, Jim, but not Blair here, other than the Rainer tag."

Jim immediately sensed Blair's shoulders stiffen. That sort of thing was a red rag to a bull, as far as his partner's civil liberty sensibilities were concerned, but Blair recovered his composure quickly, nodding over his beer.

"Hmmm, that makes sense. Rainier still aren't that high-tech. The only thing on me like that is a library card, and I don't have a credit card with me right now. I guess that's why your machine was stumped."

Jim could tell his friend was rattled. He could practically hear the cogs in his brain whirring. It didn't take a moment for Blair to segue into it.

"I guess there might be a lot of law enforcement opportunities in what you're developing with that thing, Burt. Sure, it could be good for security, but that kind of development could be used elsewhere - in the streets, in your own house.... People's privacy would be under threat. All sorts of companies, and governments too, could use it to spy on the population. You'll have a lot of trouble convincing people they should give up their civil liberties...."

Jim sighed and put up a hand. If they were stuck there for the night, it would be better to at least try to be on friendly terms with these people.

"Chief, I really think Burt will have thought this sort of implication through, you know."

But Weston was nodding vigorously at Blair's words.

"Oh, you are absolutely right, of course. But that's not what we had in mind at all. It would merely be an ID scan, not a way of researching the records beneath that. Of course, there would need to be safeguards, but we think the product's usefulness would on balance outweigh any risks involved and recommend it to most institutions. And by the way, I really can't claim any credit for it. It's Louise who's the electronics genius in this household. I'm the lowly psychologist."

He nodded ironically to Blair.

"Soft science, you know."

"Well, I *have* been here before," said Louise smoothly. "I'm sure you boys won't remember, but there was a firm called Leeson Electronics that went to the market about ten years ago. It had been my family's firm and as a college graduate I was put to work on the development side of it. Turns out, it was something I was good at, and I ended up running the company. We sold out for a sizeable sum, and now I can concentrate on what I enjoy most, which is designing fun things."

Jim saw Blair's eyes narrow at that, and wondered himself about the description of a stinger as a "fun thing".

"And of course Louise's skill and genius has bought us this place." Burt swept his hand around to indicate the house. "As well as some surrounding land. Louise's family historically came from the Cascade area, but we've both been on the east coast for many years. When Louise sold the company, we decided it would be a nice area to return to, and it's been perfect. It provides us with the space and quiet surroundings we both need. I think the east is so crowded now, anyway. You know, you guys are so lucky to be living here. We count our blessings every day now!"

"Well, your work seems very impressive, I must say, Louise," nodded Jim. "And you, Burt, do you practice here? It's a long way to get your clients to travel."

Weston grinned.

"You're right there, Jim. Very little passing trade, you know! No, I had my fill of diary appointments and university budgets back east. It's wonderful just to concentrate on writing and thinking here now."

Blair was listening intently to this exchange.

"What schools were you working with, back there, Burt?"

Weston gave him a sideways look, as if pondering Blair's motive in asking the question. Then the easy smile came back to his face.

"Oh, my associations with the universities weren't that formal. I had connections, you know, from my practice. Some of my research subjects were students. But mainly it was private patient work. What I discovered through working with my patients gave me a lot of cause for thought, but then I was far too busy to be able to take the time to write it up and really ponder, you know? Now I have that luxury."

Blair nodded in sympathy.

"That's a luxury indeed, man. It's so difficult to find that thinking time in the normal day."

Once again, he turned to the teenager on the chair.

"And Julie, how about you? It must be pretty cool, staying in this great forest. It's an amazing place, you know."

At hearing her name, Julie's face had lit up, and she turned to Blair listening intently to his words. Jim ground his teeth a little. Couldn't the kid pause for one instant in his apparent quest to flirt with every female that crossed his path? What was so interesting about that insipid girl anyway?

Julie still hadn't replied and Louise looked discomfited.

"Julie, honey, answer Blair's question."

The girl now seemed confused, and Louise rose from the couch.

"I think Julie and I need to look to our chores if we have guests," she said brightly.

But then Julie started talking.

"I was walking," she said, directly to Blair, her blue eyes wide and oddly empty.

"Yes, that's it," said Louise briskly. "Julie loves hiking. That's what she does around here."

But Julie kept on speaking.

"I was walking," she repeated. "I was walking. I was walking...."

Jim saw Blair's face change as he looked at her, and he let his vision home in on the girl's face. Teenage skin, a youthful bloom, but oddly slack muscles, impassive and expressionless;

the bright smile was no longer on show. But though her eyes were wide, they were no longer empty; there was a flicker of an emotion there, that looked like confusion, or maybe fear.

"Come on, Julie, we have chores to do," said Louise, taking her hand.

At the sound of Louise's voice, the girl's blank smile returned and the blue eyes went back to their vacant look.

"I'm so sorry," Louise mouthed to Blair and Jim as she led Julie into the kitchen. Then, leaving the girl to walk forward of her own accord, she spoke to Burt.

"Honey, we'll just finish up supper and then we can eat. I'm sure our guests must be ravenous by now, and hopefully a bit drier. Your bedrooms are all ready," she added, with a brilliant smile at Jim. "Do you need some dry clothes? I'm sure Burt has some that might fit, though they may not be quite...ummm... broad enough in the chest, for you, Jim."

Jim had still been contemplating the girl's behaviour and the question came as a surprise. Blair chipped in for them both.

"We're fine, thank you. We've been drying off nicely and we don't want to put you to any further trouble. We have a couple of sleeping bags in the truck. We can go and get them and just bed down here. That will do us just fine, thank you."

"Oh, good heavens, no!" cried Louise, "we insist! We caused your truck to come to grief, so the very least we can do is feed you and give you a decent bed for the night before we let you get on your way. Now, Julie and I have been busy as bees as soon as we saw your truck. Saw it had hit the stinger, I mean. Everything is practically ready. Burt, do lead our guests through to the diner."

She disappeared into the kitchen after Julie. Jim watched her leave, betting silently that Louise's immaculate appearance implied that the only busy bee in the house had been the girl.

"Hopefully the rain will have eased by morning," said Burt. "It's what the weather guys have been saying. Then we can have a look at that truck."

"That's really not necessary, Burt. I'm sure Blair and I can cope, if you could maybe let us know of a repair shop in the area. At Emerson, maybe? I could ring in the morning. I'm guessing our cell-phones won't be working around here? I tried down by the truck but there was some kind of interference."

"Oh, that's a given around here," grinned Burt. "The signal comes and goes as a matter of course, but also there's been a real problem with this weather. It seems to have done something to the microwave mast down in Emerson. The signal's been out for days. And our radio is down as well, though I think that's just this afternoon's lightning in the valley. We could see it a couple of hours ago, before the clouds really closed in. It was pretty intense. We often get temporary radio problems in a storm, but Don Campbell will have it up working again before morning, I know."

He motioned the two friends through to a dining area.

"Shall we? I think the food will be ready in a moment. Radio is our main form of communication here," he explained, turning to Blair. "I can't tell you how peaceful it is not to have the phone ringing all the time. We hardly ever use our cell phones. But if you have a spare tyre, Jim," he continued, patting Jim familiarly on the shoulder, "then I'm pretty sure one of our spare tyres will fit your vehicle. The 'Cruisers are a similar weight to your truck. We can fix it up in the morning and you can return a tyre on your way home, maybe. Drop in any time, just avoid the road blocks!"

He laughed heartily at his own joke, and both Blair and Jim joined in politely.

"Seriously," continued Burt in a more confidential tone, with an eye on the kitchen and looking slightly embarrassed, "I hope you guys will be good enough to keep what you've seen here to yourselves, for a while at least. Our prototypes should be ready for discussion with some manufacturers shortly but we're still waiting for the patent paperwork to come through. So, you see, it would be very damaging to our efforts here for anything to... err... *slip out* in the meantime. Maybe, if you wouldn't mind, you might sign a little piece of paper before you go? A sort of confidentiality clause, if you will....."

Jim gave Blair a glance and replied for the both of them.

"Sure, Burt, we'd be happy to. And we'd certainly not be shouting our mouths off to people about it if it's legit business."

Burt's beam was wide and genuine.

"Thank you, thank you! Now, no more talk of such sordid things! Supper is moments away, I'm sure. You must be ravenous."

Supper was, and they were. Despite Louise's protestation that it was "*oh, just stuff out of the freezer, you know. I only shop about once a week in Emerson but I cook and freeze for an army*", the stew was delicious and there was home-baked bread to go with it. After Jim's initial hesitation, he found he was eating heartily and quite enjoying the food.

The people weren't quite so easy to take to. Outwardly, Burt seemed pleasant company, intelligent and genial, and Louise, though a bit too forward in the way she looked at him, for Jim's liking, had a dry wit and an infectious smile. They nattered amiably about sports for a while; Burt confessed to having a big screen TV in his den, an addiction he couldn't shake, he said, though he still supported the east coast teams.

But something was off, and Jim couldn't quite pinpoint it. It didn't help that he could hear a constant whine from the various electronic devices in the house. Clearly there were touch pads for the doors and the drapes and the lights, but even when he dialled down, something kept piercing through his brain with its mosquito-like keening, and after some surreptitious scanning of the fittings around the room he detected other sources, tiny devices fixed to bookcases and the ceiling light itself. They were either small cameras or listening bugs, maybe both.

That was a bit unsettling, even if he was to put it down to some kind of psychological observation experiment that Burt had rigged up in his own home. He didn't feel comfortable with the idea that every forkful, every sip, every movement was being observed and

recorded. He tried to put it out of his mind, remain civil, and hope they could be out of there with first light, the next day.

He could tell Blair was also troubled by the set-up, but for different reasons, it would appear, and that niggled Jim increasingly through the evening. After the first foray into the food, Blair's knife and fork had slowed considerably, and he spent a good part of the time looking covertly at Julie. Jim found his impatience with his young friend increasing.

Maybe Blair was irritated with the way the Westons seemed to treat their niece like a maid of all work around the house - throughout the meal she was being asked to get up and do this, do that, "check the weather, Julie," "get the salad, Julie," "offer our guests some more bread, Julie" - and that kind of treatment was bound to anger Blair as matter of course. But the fact that she was young and pretty touched a raw nerve in Jim, one that he had steadfastly refused to acknowledge.

This girl, she hardly seemed the type for Sandburg to pursue, but he supposed it was just the fact that she was female. He secretly threw a few senses out to gauge Julie better, and found himself bemused. She was calm, with a very slow heart-rate; she wasn't exhibiting any signs of nerves or shyness that might account for her quiet demeanour; rather, she seemed switched off, disengaged. Maybe it was a troubled, depressive teen thing? In fact, he really couldn't register much about her at all.

Blair, on the other hand - Blair was jumpy, on edge. Looking at him now, Jim could see his eyes flash with something barely hidden as he responded politely to Louise's offer of more food. And even though his face was outwardly calm, Jim sensed some impatience, some volatility about him. He found his irritation with his friend growing unreasonably.

Jesus, why did it have to be another girl? What was so special about her, for Pete's sake?

As if reading his thoughts, Blair spoke up.

"Hey Julie, this is really delicious stew, lots of great veggies! Do you like cooking?"

Julie looked at him with a blank smile, but did not answer. Louise touched her arm.

"Blair wants to know if you like to work in the kitchen, darling."

Julie glanced at Louise and then turned back to Blair.

"I like to work in the kitchen," she said.

"Yeah, that's great, I love to cook, too. So does Jim. He doesn't make a big thing of it but he's really good! And you know, I bet there's plenty of wonderful wild ingredients you can use, in these mountains. Do you go foraging around here?"

Julie's eyes widened, and Jim saw something flicker across them again, that fleeting emotion.

"In the mountains," said Julie. "I like to walk. I was walking in the mountains."

Louise hurriedly rose and urged Julie to her feet.

"That's enough, honey. Time to get dessert. You carry the plates out to the kitchen."

Julie fell silent immediately, rose and started gathering the plates and dishes from the table.

"Hey," said Blair, rising, too, "let me help you."

Louise put a gentle hand on his arm to restrain him.

"Truly, Blair, she's fine, she doesn't need any help. Do you, honey?"

Julie ducked her head and made for the kitchen, balancing her plates. Jim felt the need to intervene.

"Sandburg, let the lady get on, okay. Not everyone finds you irresistible."

Blair shot Jim an icy look, one which in another environment he might have easily translated as 'take a look around you, blockhead' and would have got him thinking. Right now, he saw it, as 'back off, asshole!' and was further incensed.

Burt and Louise, however, found Jim's remark highly amusing, but in a moment Louise waved the laughter down, her face taking on a look of kindly concern.

"Don't make a thing of it, boys, but Julie is visiting us here because her family think she's having trouble at home. Self-esteem issues, depression, that sort of thing. They hoped a long holiday away from the usual environment might help her find a way out of it, and of course she can always talk to Burt here Uncle Burt, I should say." She smiled adoringly at her husband.

"I try to do my best," the other said modestly. "She's not my patient officially and couldn't be for ethical reasons. But I can at least listen to her fears. It's one of the things about modern society that I find so damaging," he continued, toying with his wine glass - he had switched from beer over supper. "The constant obsession with over-thinking things, always tearing every emotion and decision apart, always being pressurised to make new choices. Most people can't deal with this constant pressure. It would be so much better if they had someone to do the deciding for them."

Jim could almost see Blair's hackles rise.

"And deny their free will?" he asked. His tone sounded mild, but Jim heard the undercurrent of steel in it. Burt didn't seem to notice, but continued breezily in the same vein.

"Why not? They would be so much happier. No decisions to make, no pressure to deal with, every option accounted for. Most people just want an easy life, you know. Unburdening themselves with a psychologist is one way of dealing with it, but it doesn't remove the root cause, which is their inability to cope."

"And this would be good for who, exactly?" Blair's voice was getting edgier. "People like Julie? But I guess not people like you, Burt, or Louise?"

"Chief..." began Jim in a warning tone.

Burt's face went dark for a moment, but cleared quickly, assuming once again the impression of general bonhomie.

"Ah, I see the scientist in you eager to pull apart the logic of all that! Good for you, Blair! But I'm only commenting generally on what I see. I mean no harm by it. It's scientific observation, not a campaign against the rest of humanity, you know! It would hardly be possible, in any case."

There was a pregnant silence for a moment. Then Jim broke in, keen to lighten the atmosphere.

"Chief, why don't you tell Burt and Louise what you were telling me on the way up here. You know, the myths and legends? I'm sure they'd be interested. They may not know, having come here from the east."

"Oh," said Blair, jolted out of his introspection. "Well, yeah, this area is full of important folklore and ancient history of the American peoples. I guess the main story concerns the huckleberries. The berries on the mountains around here have been sustaining native peoples through hard winters for thousands of years. The tale goes like this - long ago, this world was inhabited only by animals. The animals could talk and understand each other, and they were, basically, just like we are today. One day Creator called everyone together and said, 'There are new people coming to live on this earth. You've got to make room for them by selecting new names and identities. Choose what you want to be in this new world, and I'll help you.'"

Blair's eyes brightened, and Jim could tell how he was warming to his subject.

"Well, the animals all declared what they wanted to be, and Creator asked each one to perform certain feats in order to prove their worth in their new role, and if an animal failed to perform that feat he had to choose something else, until everyone had their place. Every time an animal qualified for what he wanted to be, Creator took a part of his own body and placed in the new creature. And that's why the native peoples respect everything that has life, be it plant, animal, or human, because they are all part of Creator."

Louise clapped her hands.

"Oh, how cute! What a sweet way of looking at things!"

Blair looked daggers at her, but quickly averted his gaze, continuing:

"But here's the bit about the huckleberries. When Creator was finished with his work, he looked and saw that there weren't any berries in the mountains. The only parts of his body that were left by now were his eyes. So he took his eyes and put them into the ground in the mountains. The veins in his eyes bled into the earth and become the roots, the roots became the plant, and the berries sprouted and became the huckleberries!"

"Charming," mused Burt. "A deeply reflective and highly imaginative way to describe the rational workings of the natural world."

"So, you don't like the idea of man and the environment being all part of one big scheme of life?" asked Blair, with patently forced politeness.

"As a creation myth, it has a lot of resonance, undoubtedly," replied Burt with a rather patronising smile. "But it's hardly key to modern-day thinking on how man utilises his surroundings – with all due respect for environmental protection, of course," he added smoothly.

"Oh, yeah? Well, here's another story," said Blair, his eyes dark now with anger, his words coming faster and sharper. "You heard about the Wendigo, maybe? The stories about it mainly come from the eastern states and Canada, but I reckon the Ojibwe people around here would have brought it with them when they moved west, and I guess they know a thing or two, you know? It's a monstrous creature that brings storm and ice and snow and darkness. It seeks out people who fail to observe the natural balance of things, people who exploit and destroy, and who don't respect the rights of others. When the Wendigo's after you, there's no escape, it'll tear you to pieces..."

"Sounds like it should be working for Greenpeace!" laughed Louise. Checked in mid-flow, Blair flushed, and turned his face to the table.

Well, that worked pretty good as a diversion, thought Jim, ruefully. He turned again to Burt, desperate to change the subject once more.

"Tell us more about your house. I can see there's a lot of electronic devices at work here. Don't you worry about power outages?"

By now Julie had returned with the dessert, and Burt started on the ice cream that she had handed him, not showing any gratitude for her efforts, though it hardly seemed to matter to her. She disappeared into the kitchen again. Blair was about to call her back when Louise put a hand on his arm once more.

"It's fine, dear. She doesn't like ice cream."

Blair looked at her in disbelief, but quickly schooled his expression into politeness. Burt was still talking.

"We have our own generators here, a main and a backup. They're out back, against the mountainside. Louise set up some photovoltaic cells for the top of the hill. That's a new technology for domestic situations and one that'll be booming soon, I know. The controls for those, together with the rest of the electronic circuitry, are down in the cellar – keeps it out of the way and there's plenty of room down there with our wine!"

He raised his glass in a little toast to his wife.

"But otherwise we run on straightforward diesel. The tanks are out under the cliff behind us. We top them up on a regular basis, and we're set for anything the seasons can throw at us."

"Your devices have manual overrides though?" persisted Jim. "I mean, what if the doors get stuck?"

"They don't," said Louise tartly, but then mollified her tone. "But even if they did, we can work around that. I'm also working on voice-activated controls. That's the house of the future. You'll be able to control everything in the home, sitting in one chair. Think of the advantages!"

Jim pondered, but felt less than convinced, though he thought it best not to criticise too much. And he definitely didn't want to own up to the fact that he was aware of the surveillance kit that lurked in the various nooks and crannies. Nevertheless he couldn't help but poke a little.

"And I guess in the House of the Future you could always rig up some little cameras to make sure the maid wasn't stealing the silver?"

Burt shot him a sharp look, which quickly morphed into suavity once again.

"For those of us that paranoid, there will always be options," he said smoothly. Louise chimed in.

"I can see you're not converts. Let me show you how very easy it would be to run your own house automatically. We've got a few things rigged up already. They're programmed for Burt's and my voice." She turned her head towards the music centre in the corner of the room.

"Music, play!" she commanded, and the CD deck display immediately lit up, its innards started to whirr and some quiet John Coltrane filtered out into the room. Louise beamed at them happily, then looked up at the ceiling rose and said:

"Lights brighten." They did. "Lights dim." They obeyed.

"Amazing," said Jim, trying to force some enthusiasm into his voice. Louise was obviously pleased with the results of her labours. She smiled at him winningly, then turned towards the kitchen doorway.

"Cupboard one, open!"

There was whirr as the door to one of the kitchen units rolled back, even though they couldn't actually see it. But Louise's triumphant smile disappeared as there was a sudden crash from the kitchen and then Julie's voice came clearly from within.

"Oh no ! Don't want that! Mom? I was walking. Mom? All my chores are done. Don't want that....!"

Burt swore under his breath and threw down his napkin. Both he and Louise leapt for the kitchen door, and crowded into the kitchen. Blair and Jim exchanged a quick glance and made for the door as well, Jim already throwing out his hearing to catch what was being said between the Westons.

"I told you not to push that stuff," Burt was muttering angrily, whilst Louise was patting Julie's face and cooing softly to her. "Too much interference."

Jim shouldered his way through and helped lift Julie up off the floor, so she was propped up against one of the cupboards. There were plates and dishes strewn around where she had fallen, but, despite the chaos, her face was quiet and calm once more

"Is she okay?" asked Blair. "Can we do anything to help?"

"It's fine," replied Louise briskly. "She does have these little turns."

"Well, what about a doctor?" persisted Blair. "Is it some form of epilepsy?"

"No, no." Louise stood up and offered Julie her hand; the girl got up off the floor as if nothing had happened. "It's just an emotional thing. I think she gets homesick from time to time. Don't you, darling?" Julie smiled at her brightly. Blair conveyed his disbelief at this opinion in a glance at Jim that spoke volumes for his anger.

Burt had also straightened up and he turned to Jim.

"Let's go back into the lounge, shall we? Louise will sort things out. I can assure you that we do keep our niece's health under careful observation – we are after all *in loco parentis* here, but truly, this is just a minor emotional outbreak."

Blair was on his hands and knees, picking up dishes and shoving them on the counter.

"Let me," he insisted, but Louise took his arm and steered him towards the door.

"Nonsense, Blair, Julie and I will do it later on. You go and relax in the lounge with Burt. Julie's fine, now."

Blair gave Jim another look and then turned to Julie.

"Okay if I give you a hand, Julie?"

"I'm fine now," said the girl. "I need to get on with my chores."

Jim saw Blair look hard at her, then he turned away, shrugging his shoulders.

"Okay, okay, I know when I'm not wanted." He tried for an air of levity, but it was clearly not genuine, and when the three men had convened again in the lounge, with Burt offering cigars and brandy, the mood was still fairly strained. Jim was pleased when Louise rejoined them, bringing with her some small cups of coffee, confirmed that Julie was perfectly happy and suggested they might be tired and ready for bed. To tell the truth, he didn't feel that sleepy, but it would at least bring this rather uncomfortable evening to an end. Blair shrugged at his unspoken question, and so Jim assented for the both of them.

"Well, I'm sure we'll all feel better for a good night's sleep," said Burt, as if acknowledging the strained atmosphere. "See you first thing in the morning, Jim, and we'll sort this tyre out. Never mind me, I'm an early riser."

The two friends took their backpacks from the hall and followed Louise up the polished pine staircase as it curved up to the upper level. Here, the valley side of the building was completely glazed, though with the dark of the night and the rain still lashing at it, one would never have known the extraordinary landscape beyond.

"You must have one heck of a view from here," Jim noted, hoping a renewed attempt at conversation might improve the situation a little. Louise seemed unperturbed in any case.

"It's gorgeous," she agreed. "You can see for miles. No way anyone could sneak up on us." Her hand lighted on his forearm, giving it a casual stroke. "The privacy's perfect. You can get up to anything you want. Maybe you'd care to join us sometime?"

If he had been in a better mood, Blair would probably have burst out laughing at his friend's startled expression. But Jim quickly recovered and was relieved to see Louise grinning now in apparent good humour - just a teasing remark, then - and opening a bedroom door.

"This'll be great," he said, by way of managing not to answer her leading question. "Seriously, we don't need much to make us comfortable. Okay, Sandburg, get your gear in here."

"Oh no!" protested Louise, "This is *your* bedroom, Jim! Blair's is down the hall. We got them ready, specially."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Unless I've misread the situation, of course...."

"Oh, no! That's great! Absolutely fine! No problem!" Jim's response was embarrassingly rapid, and the moment the words came out of his mouth, he felt rather foolish. Why the hell was he reacting like that? Sharing a room with Sandburg was hardly a big deal, seeing as how he shared his life with the man. Who cared what other people thought? And why was he being so eager tonight to distance himself from his friend? He looked quickly at Blair to see how he took it all, but Blair's face was shuttered.

"Fine," said Louise, deftly backing Jim into the doorway. "You settle yourself down, Jim. The bathroom's en suite there. I'll just see Blair to his room."

And with that she ushered her other charge away down the corridor. Blair gave Jim one blank look over his shoulder but then turned away and didn't look back again, slipping into his allotted room practically in silence. From the far end of the corridor, Louise lifted a hand.

"Sweet dreams, Jim! If there's anything you need, just call me!"

Jim gave her a vague smile and a salute, stepped back into the room and pressed the door panel firmly so that the door slid shut. He leant his head on the frame.

What the hell had they got themselves into?

PART 3

...And she said "We are all just prisoners here, of our own device"...

Jim Ellison lay on the comfortable bed in the nicely-appointed guest room and failed miserably to get to sleep.

His mind was too busy for rest, even though, after Blair's departure, he had stripped down to his shorts and lain down, fully intending to make sure he got some rest after the trials of the evening. Whatever had been eating Sandburg, they would sort it out in the morning. But Blair's behaviour, and his own reaction to it, kept revolving in his brain, allowing no respite.

It didn't help that they had managed to shack up with what seemed like Cascade's answer to the Addams Family. This was one seriously weird house. On the surface they were two over-educated, over-funded, leisure-hour scientists who didn't mean much harm, but the more they had revealed about the nature of their "work", the more it unsettled Jim, and Blair was clearly deeply disturbed about its implications.

Blair. Jim had been really looking forward to this trip with his friend. For all his bitching on the way there, he had wanted the downtime that it had promised, and the chance to rest up and talk to him. There was a lot of stuff Jim wanted to get straight with Blair. He knew they hadn't really cleared the air after the dissertation crisis, and although Blair's position at both Rainier and the PD was now secure – or at least as secure as anyone's job in the current climate – he still felt Blair regarded his presence there as being on sufferance.

Nothing could have been further from the truth. That the PD valued Dr Sandburg was a given, but that wasn't the crucial thing, as far as Jim was concerned. The more he and Blair worked together and lived together and laughed together and bickered together, the more Jim realised that there was no way he wanted to disentangle their relationship, however unconventional it had seemed at first, and no doubt still did to the outside world.

Because since Blair had come into his life, things had fallen into place in a way they had never done before. He didn't know what it meant, but he wanted Blair clear on this, whatever its significance might be. Hell, the kid might even have an answer in that remarkable brain of his.

So the irritation and impatience he had felt tonight with Blair's behaviour – and what had been so reprehensible about Blair's behaviour anyway? – troubled him. Deep down, he was convinced of Blair's importance in his life, and yet tonight he'd been behaving like a jealous...

Now, hey, come on, Ellison! Jealous? What do you need to be jealous about? Blair's hots for that girl – if hots is what they were? Jealous of Blair...?

Jealous of the girl?

He shook his head in irritation and rubbed his eyes. The whine had started up again, he realised, and he glanced around the room, looking for hidden devices; sure enough, there was one on the ceiling light, right above the bed.

Right above the bed. What kind of kinky stuff as going on here anyway? The high-pitched drone must mean that the camera, or whatever it was, had just been switched on. Was he being observed? He had sudden impulse to bare his ass and moon the watching lens, but though payback was tempting, he restrained himself. Better just to keep quiet and be pleased that in a few hours they'd be out of there.

He dialled his hearing down as far as he thought prudent and shut his eyes. Concentrating on not listening, with a nod to Blair's meditation techniques, proved more successful than he'd anticipated, and he jerked awake some time later to a small noise outside his door. His high state of alert relaxed right away when he realised who it would be.



"You don't usually feel the need to knock, Sandburg."

The door opened, but it wasn't Blair who entered. In something like panic he switched on the small bedside light and pulled some covers over himself.

Louise stood in the doorway, looking tall and lovely in a gauzy nightgown that brushed the floor and fell off one creamy shoulder, and in general left very little to the imagination. Jim pulled his gaze away from the main view and forced himself to focus on her face. She was smiling knowingly.

"Sorry to disappoint. I just wanted to check you had all you need."

She stroked a hand down the doorframe next to her and then moved further into the room; the door slid shut behind her.

"If you're anything like me, Jim, you find that scientists can be sadly poor company in some respects. Always with their mind on higher matters, when sometimes all you want to do is have fun. Don't you agree?"

Jim sat further up in the bed and gathered more bedding around him. He cleared his throat.

"You guys have been very hospitable, Louise. We're both very grateful. But really, I'm absolutely fine here, I've got all I need, and maybe both of us just better get back to bed?"

"Kind of what I had in mind," purred Louise, as she advanced into the room to sit on the edge of Jim's bed. He moved a little further up the mattress towards the headboard, very wary, but short of leaping out of the window, it wasn't far enough to deter Louise. She reached out and ran a hand up and down Jim's leg, lying under the covers. He shifted again, trying to politely edge out of her way.

"Look, Louise, I don't know what's going on here, and forgive me if I'm misreading things. But where I was brought up, it was seen as the height of bad manners to bed another man's wife when you've just been invited into his home."

Louise huffed in irritation; her hand didn't stop its movement.

"My, how very old-fashioned of you! This is *my* home, you realise? I bought it, and I can say what goes on in it. And anyway, Burt is perfectly fine with this. He quite likes it, anyway. Adds a little spice."

"Will he watch now, or set to record?" asked Jim waspishly.

She looked a little startled for a moment, then lifted her eyes meaningfully to the ceiling where the little camera was positioned.

"Oh, he's not there now", she assured Jim. "It's for my own pleasure, really. I'll probably watch later, if it's any good."

She leaned further over the bed; her perfume came to him in waves.

"I could do a copy for you..."

It wasn't as if Jim had never been propositioned in his life, but Louise's assumption that it was going to happen, just like *that*, fairly took his breath away. He wondered with increasing concern at what point she was going to see that no meant no. The rate her hand was progressing up his leg, it guessed it wouldn't be any time soon.

"Louise, this isn't right, and I'm not at all comfortable here..."

"Well, lie down, silly!"

"No! I don't mean that! I mean I'm not comfortable being in this position with you – this ethical position, I mean..."

Dammit, where was Sandburg when you needed a pithy turn of phrase?

"...Look, I'm flattered by your ...er... interest, of course I am. You're a very beautiful woman. But... this isn't the way I do things."

Louise was now leaning against him, her hand stroking his chest, her expression something like wonder, and... hunger.

"Then maybe you should cut yourself a bit of slack, Detective." she breathed. "Enjoy yourself for a change. Get that annoying little moral monkey off you shoulder. I'm sure little Blair will take it all in his stride. You don't even have to tell him...."

Blair?

"Blair?"

"He doesn't own you, you know. And anyway, finders, keepers." She lay across his chest and ran her hands down his face. Despite the weirdness, Jim knew he was responding in a way any fairly heterosexual male with a few red blood corpuscles would.

'Fairly heterosexual'? Where the hell did that come from?

"And I'll bet you," continued Louise, her breath tickling his chin, "that you're going to be begging me to own you forever, before we're through."

He doesn't own me. I can cut myself some slack here. Blair doesn't own me, she can have me, she can own me.....

"Ah, oh, right ... um... didn't know you had company, Jim."

Louise leapt back for the bed with a hiss, wrapping her gown around her. Jim stared at the doorway, stupefied. Finally he managed:

"Don't you ever knock? Get the hell out of here, Sandburg!"

What? Why did I say that? A second ago I was praying for rescue. Wasn't I?

Blair's face was studied blankness, but his eyes were full of shock and worry.

"Sorry, man." He pointedly didn't look at Louise, but was staring hard at Jim's dishevelled form on the bed. "I needed to ask you some stuff, plan some stuff with you, about tomorrow. You know, about when we *leave* tomorrow. Where we go."

Blair's emphasis on the words was hardly subtle, but they cut through the fug that seemed to Jim to have replaced his brain. Jim pulled himself up again to a sitting position and looked at Louise. Her initial anger had turned into a sort of cool amusement.

"Ah, Louise, I think...."

"Oh, please," she replied, with heavy irony, "I see I'm the one who's made the *faux pas* here. Let me leave you guys in peace. I seem to have lost my ... ah ... appetite anyway."

She moved to the door, brushing past Blair as she did so, and then paused for moment, lifted a hand to his face and patted his cheek.

"Believe me, young Blair, I'm not used to playing second fiddle. I guess this wasn't to be."

And with a final smile at Jim, she wafted out of the room, and the door slid shut behind her.

The room was silent for a moment, with both men staring at the closed door. Then Blair turned back to Jim.

"What the *hell*, man?"

Jim threw back the covers and launched himself out of the bed.

"What are you doing here, Sandburg?"

"Hey, man, that's my question." Blair was looking thoroughly irritated and not a little rattled. "Far be it from me to say you shouldn't have a little ... ah ... downtime, but this is kind of unexpected. I mean, right in front of her husband, practically!"

"You may recall," growled Jim dangerously, "I don't have the best track record in that respect."

"So is it the pheromones again?" Blair was clearly unable to resist a scientific query, but then his anger got the better of him.

"Man, you have to be kidding me. With that cold bitch?"

Jim turned on him, towering over him and glaring downwards.

"What's it to you, Sandburg? You don't own me!"

Blair looked genuinely shocked.

"Own you? What?"

Jim suddenly felt the anger within himself subside, leaving him feeling oddly weak. He stared at Blair, at the wide eyes that were full of concern and annoyance and ... and hurt. He put a hand out to Blair's shoulder and was pained to see his friend flinch.

"Jesus, Sandburg, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I... I dunno what I meant. I dunno what the hell is going on here. When she came in, I thought it was going to be you. She just launched herself at me. I just couldn't work out what to do."

"Looked like you had a pretty good idea to me." Blair's voice was tight.

"Dammit, Chief, I was desperate to get away from her. It was weird. I felt kind of lost, confused. Then you came in..."

"It must be the pheromones," mused Blair. "But that's odd, because you showed no signs of being affected earlier tonight. Anything but, in fact."

"Damn you!" shouted Jim, his irrational anger bubbling up again. "Damn you and your goddamn pheromones! Can't you ever leave me alone?"

Blair's shock at Jim's outburst was quickly squashed by his own anger. He coldly grabbed Jim's arm and shook it.

"I don't know where your head is, man, and I'm pretty sure I don't like it, but you've got to listen to me about something important."

Something like his old self filtered through Jim's swirl of emotions. Belatedly, he remembered they would be under observation, and he dragged Blair to the window so their backs were turned towards the rest of the room.

"Camera," he ground out. "Whatever you gotta say, you better say it quietly. From what I can work out of the set-up in this house, there's a camera recording our every move, probably microphones too. I think they were watching us from the moment the truck hit that stinger. And they will be until we leave."

Blair gave a concerned glance back at the room and turned back to the window again, pulling Jim's arm so the other man lowered his head to Blair's level.

"I know who Weston is! I've remembered. He's not Weston - it's Burt West. He was a psycho-babble guru back east several years ago."

"So?" broke in Jim. "So he's changed his name."

"Jesus, start being a cop again!" snapped Blair impatiently. "He changed it because there was a big scandal. He was alleged to have been abusing his patients, controlling them, making them do stuff they didn't want to, but they couldn't stop themselves. It was a kind of brain-conditioning project he'd started, and then, I guess, he got carried away with the power of it all. There was a public outcry and threatened legal suits, but he stopped his work quickly and disappeared from the scene. I've not heard anything about him for... oh ... a good six or seven years. This is where he ended up. And it looks to me like he's back to his old tricks."

"Why do you say that?"

"For pity's sake, Jim, can't you work it out? That girl - she's in some kind of induced quasi-catatonic state, highly susceptible to instruction, completely emotionally repressed. She's had some kind of programming done on her, I'm sure. And one of their own family, too. It's despicable!"

"Them's a lot of big words, Sandburg, like usual, and you don't impress me. Maybe she's just a troubled teen..."

"You're telling me you didn't have a good look at her, at the way she was behaving?"

"Well..."

"Yeah, exactly. You didn't get anything from her, did you? No signs of emotions, no adrenaline, no fear, no joy, no boredom, no irritation. Just *blank*. That's not teen angst!"

"Depression, like they said."

"Since when do you have to make excuses for these people, Ellison? Use your brain, if you have any left. Did she knock you on the head? Or some other part of you?"

"Crude, Chief."

"Yeah, well, I don't feel too polite right now. I want to get away from here as fast as we can tomorrow, okay? No fooling around with Mrs Robinson."

"What?"

"Keep it in your pants, man. These are not people you want to be associated with, believe me."

"And you drooling after Julie all night was just in the cause of scientific observation, was it?"

"What? Drooling? Are you out of your mind, man?"

"Yeah, drooling! '*Julie, can I help you, Julie?*'" mimicked Jim in a high-pitched voice.

Blair looked at him in disgust.

"Where are you at, Jim? You're just not being you, right now."

"How the hell would you know?"

Blair suddenly broke away from him and made for the door.

"Impossible... you are being such a child," he muttered. Then he turned again.

"What did you sense out there, Jim?"

"What? When?"

"In the forest, when we were by the truck. There was something there, wasn't there?"

Jim went quiet. It wasn't something he'd wanted to remember, that strange elemental feeling, of being surrounded by blackness, and cold, implacable hatred. And yet there had been nothing physically there, just the wind and the weather.

"Yeah, thought so," said Blair tartly. "There's something really wrong here. Out of kilter, twisted..."



"Evil?" mocked Jim. Blair's eyes flashed.

"I don't know about that. The forest felt ... scary, overwhelming – possessed, somehow. And I know you felt it, too."

"Stop prying into my mind, Sandburg. I've had enough of this. I want to get some sleep."

Blair raised his hands in surrender.

"Okay, okay, I'm going. Just... let's get away quickly, okay? Maybe when we're out of here, things will seem clearer. Because this house sure messes with the psyche, you know?"

"Get the hell out."

Blair's face closed down. He slammed his hand on the door-panel to open the door, and was gone, leaving Jim standing in the middle of the room feeling deflated, confused and suddenly bereft.

*

Jesus, that went well.

His mind in turmoil, Blair strode down the corridor to his room, tearing off his overshirt as he went.

What the hell was wrong with Jim? It didn't just anger Blair, this odd antagonism and contrariness; it perplexed him. His friend's behaviour showed the same marks of paranoia and bitterness that had characterised the whole sorry Alex Barnes mess. Was there another Sentinel in the area, again? Was that what Jim sensed outside in the forest?

But Blair had felt that, too. It couldn't be a Sentinel thing, surely? Whatever it was, it had turned the normal, stoically-calm Ellison into a jumpy, hostile ... jerk.

He hit the door with the palm of his hand and it slid open for him. Tossing his overshirt onto the chair by the wall he turned to the bed.

Whattthefuck? A girl in his bed ... Julie.

She was wearing just her underwear, and sat against the headboard as if she were waiting for a bus. Turning her head towards him, she said brightly:

"I'm here for you."

Blair still hadn't moved, rooted to the spot with shock. He put out a hand.

"Julie, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here."

"I'm here for you. You want me."

"Ummm ... no... no, I don't."

Her face showed neither desolation nor surprise.

"You don't want me. I'm here for you."

"Yeah, I can see that. But Julie, honestly, I don't mean to offend you, and any man would be delighted to see you in his bed, truly. But not here, not now. It's not right. I don't think you're happy here and I don't think you really know what you're doing, so I think you should leave."

She looked doubtful then.

"Shall I take my things off? I'm here for you."

"Really, I want you to go. Go back to your own bed, get some sleep, okay?"

She stared at him for some moments, then threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood up, dragging some of the covers onto the floor as she did so; she didn't seem to notice.

"You want me to go. Have this drink, please."

He did a double-take at her abrupt change of subject, and belatedly realised she was pointing at the night-stand where a pink mug stood gently steaming.

"I don't want a drink, thank you, Julie."

She looked back at him with a frown.

"I brought it for you. You want a drink. I brought this. Please drink it."

She picked it up and brought it to him. He tried to look at her as dispassionately as a medical doctor would. On any other occasion that might have been a little difficult, with her lithe young body barely clothed and very inviting, and her lovely face completely unperturbed and waiting for his attentions. But he felt nothing, nothing at all. This was just so wrong, so fucked-up. He didn't believe this girl was in any way cognisant of what she had just offered to do to him, to have done to her. The thought repelled him.

He gazed at the mug bemused, but she insisted.

"You want to drink this. I brought it for you. Please drink it."

Unwillingly he took it, just to shut her up, but she still wasn't satisfied.

"I brought it for you. You will drink it, please. I brought for you."

The frown was back. Now he felt a bit guilty. Was he making too big a thing about this? Why did he think his judgement was so infallible all the time? This girl might be sick in some way, but why should he invent all these conspiracy theories about it? What did that say about his own mind? No wonder Jim was tired of the sight of him and his constant babble....

"Please drink it."

Now she smiled. He sighed and brought the mug to his lips. It was a malted drink, heavy and overpoweringly sweet; something he hadn't had since he was a child. He took a gulp, and Julie smiled more broadly.

"You'll like it! It's good. Drink it, please!"

Okay, so it was kind of... palatable. It seemed very innocent, and also very bizarre, to be drinking a child's bedtime drink in a stranger's bedroom with a semi-naked teenager. He drank some more, and as the girl was clearly not going to go until he drained every last drop, he did just that, and showed her the empty mug.

"Happy now?" He tried to sound kind.

"I'm happy. You want me to go?"

He sighed.

"Yes, Julie. Thank you for your ...er... offer, but I want you to go."

She took the mug from him and put it on the nightstand.

"I'll go now," she said brightly, and simply brushed past him to the door which closed behind her with a gentle thud.

Blair stared at the door, then turned and stared at the rumpled bed. Jesus, was there no end to the weirdness of this night? He picked up the covers and tried to straighten them, feeling very weary.

It was all too much. Maybe after some sleep, things might seem better. Maybe Jim would be back to normal and maybe they would be out of there in a few hours, and safe again.

Because they weren't safe here, were they?

With that thought rolling around in his brain, he dropped heavily on the bed and into sleep.



Despite his troubled mind, Jim was surprised to find himself once again drifting into sleep when he lay down on the bed. His argument with Blair had disturbed him greatly; he couldn't understand why he had laid into his friend in that way.

Blair had been entirely right - the situation with Louise had been out of order. Not just because she was a married woman, but because, frankly, he hadn't been that attracted to her, not earlier in the evening, certainly. Okay, she was very lovely and intelligent and witty, but that hadn't done it for him. Blair's words came back to him - "cold bitch". Yeah, that had been his feeling too, until she'd invaded his room and started draping herself all over him. He'd felt weird, somehow displaced, ever since they'd drunk the last of their coffee and come upstairs.

Now he had his own situation with Sandburg to sort out. Oh, they'd row about it on the way out of there the next day, sure. But he didn't like the potential souring of their friendship in this inexplicable way.

Jesus, how bad could a wrong turning get?

So it was with little expectation that he had stretched out on the comfortable, but now very undesirable, bed; the scent of Louise was everywhere. He turned onto his side and tried to focus on the sound of the rain outside, in a hope that would lull him to sleep.

And so it apparently did, as he drifted awake again some time later to muffled sounds in the house. They seemed to be coming from downstairs, and he automatically dialled up his hearing to try to distinguish what they were.

It was Julie's voice, and what he heard was disturbing. She was plaintively calling for help, but in a hopeless, defeated way as if she knew no help would be coming to her. He threw back the covers, dragged on his pants and opened the door, listening cautiously. There were no other signs of movement, no one else speaking, but the girl kept moaning and crying softly.

"Help me please, let me out of here! Let me out! Please help me, someone, please!"

He threw a glance at Sandburg's door – firmly shut. No, he wasn't going to waken him. He didn't want another episode of fawning over Julie. Jim Ellison could handle this perfectly well on his own, thank you very much.

He descended the staircase swiftly and pinpointed where she was - the lounge. There were still a couple of lights burning, but even without them he would have had little difficulty in seeing her sitting on the couch, head in her hands, her shoulders shaking with grief. His dislike of the Westons developed some more.

"Julie, honey, it's Jim. I'm here, can I help you?" He moved closer, and bent down near the couch to take her hand.

Her head snapped up, and she looked at him with shining eyes.

"Jim! I'm here. You want me?"

"I... What?"

Before he could continue, she leapt up from the couch and wrapped her arms and legs around him, toppling him backwards onto the rug.

"Jim's here! Jim's here!"

Her grip was vice-like, and he was desperately trying to disentangle himself when the main lights snapped on and Louise and Burt appeared in the room. Still fighting off Julie's octopus-like attack, he tried to address them as they stood there with surprisingly broad smiles on their faces.

"This isn't what it looks like," he protested, pushing and pulling at Julie's encircling arms, and knowing quite well that it wasn't the most convincing argument he could make. But they seemed barely concerned.

"Oh, Jim, baby," cooed Louise, "as if we care."

Too late he saw the needle in Burt's hand. Now he put all his force into throwing Julie off him, regardless of hurting her, but the syringe was already in his neck. It was a frighteningly rapid process; one moment he was rolling on the floor, the next, his arms and legs no longer obeyed his brain. He lay there helpless, unable to move, but still able to feel. He felt the sting of another needle and the bitter rush of something in his veins, he felt the brush of Louise's hair as she bent to kiss him deeply, felt the lushness of her lips and tongue. And he couldn't turn away, he couldn't spit it out.

She pulled back with a triumphant smile on her face.

"I told your little friend I don't play second fiddle. And I won't. Don't worry, you won't miss him. He's going for a walk in the woods. And you, you're ours to play with now, honey."

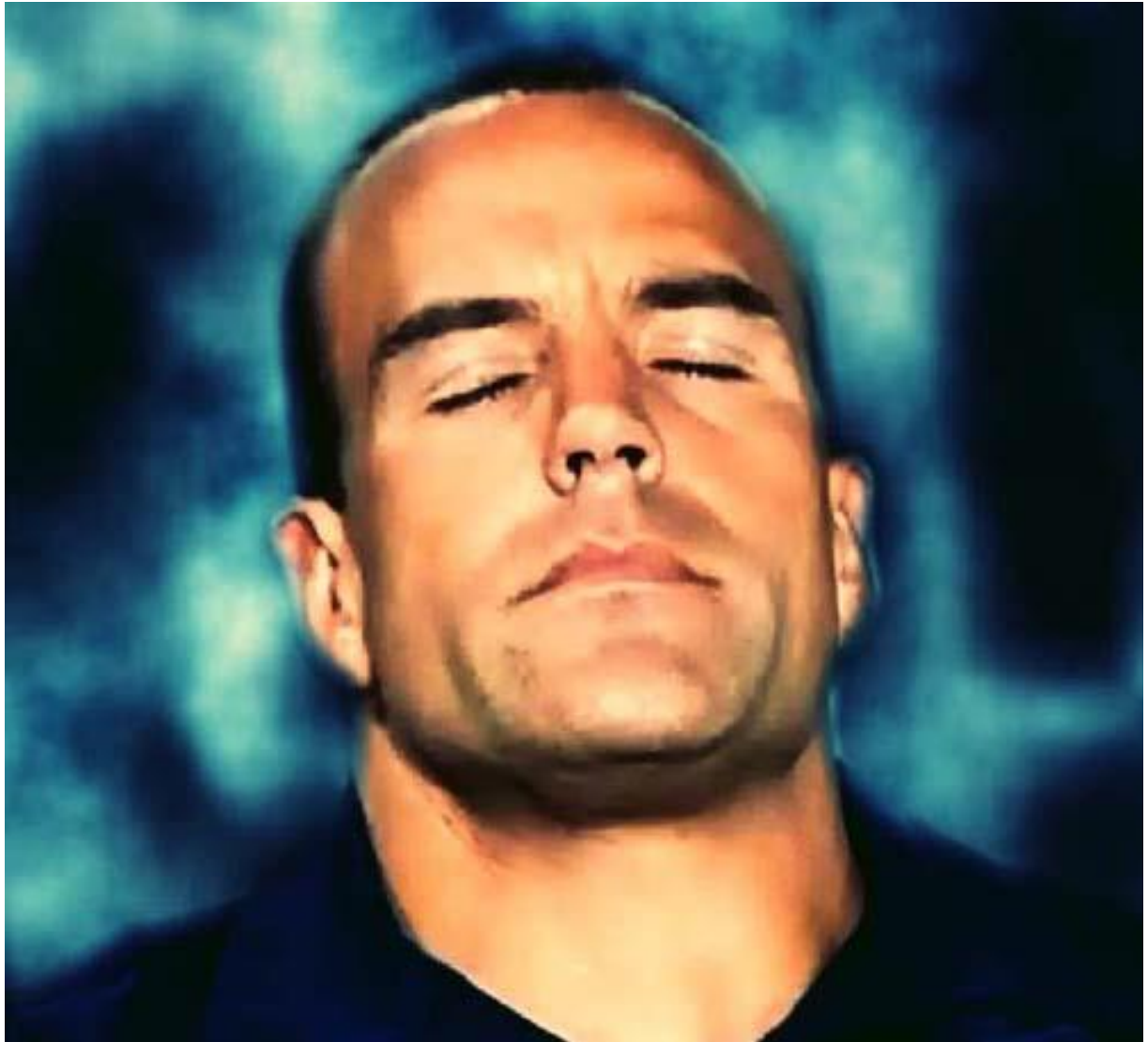
His brain was like cement, rapidly hardening, heavy and solid and incapable of supporting life....

Blair!

He wanted to shout; he'd opened his mouth, he was shouting, wasn't he? Yelling for him, yelling to warn him.... but there were no words, just a sort of strangled moan.

"Oh, for god's sake, shut him up, Burt," snapped Louise impatiently. "I hate it when they get all groan-y."

"Not long now," replied Burt evenly. And then Jim couldn't hear them speak, and his eyelids drooped and his vision blurred into darkness.



PART 4

.... **“You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!”...**

Blair woke with a start, and then slumped back down on the bed.

Jesus, his head!

He opened his eyes again, slowly focusing on unfamiliar surroundings. It took him a moment to remember he was at the Westons'. His head felt heavy and muzzy, with a persistent throb behind his temples. He was still fully-dressed, apart from his overshirt. Had he drunk too much the night before? No, just a beer or two. This was no hangover.

He slung his legs fully over the side of the bed, and tried to focus. The teenager in his bed, all Lolita meets Stepford wife - Jesus, what had been going on there? Jim *in flagrante*... well, not quite there, maybe, but not far off, if you know what I mean?... with that blonde-haired bitch. Man, this was like a nightmare trip. He squinted at the small alarm clock on the night-stand.

Oh, holy shit! Eleven thirty! Jim was going to hang, draw and quarter him. Why the hell had no one woken him? Was Jim that pissed with Blair that he'd left him sleeping late, even though the previous night he had been raring to get away?

Shit, had he left Blair behind?

Blair jumped to the window, immediately regretting his swift movement. Outside the new day had dawned some hours ago, and looked like being a carbon copy of the last. Though it had at least stopped raining, the dark clouds were still hanging over the tops of the spruces and the air was heavy with moisture.



Yeah, the sonofabitch would do just that, wouldn't he?

He shook his throbbing head in frustration. Where were these thoughts coming from? He peered out, hoping that maybe from this angle he could see the truck. Nope, not from this window, or maybe Jim had in fact driven off without him...

Don't be a paranoid idiot, Sandburg! What's wrong with you? Why would Jim do that?

It was this place, he concluded as he dragged his overshirt from the bedroom chair and pulled it on, still with half an eye on the window. It had a really bad vibe about it – menacing, perverted. The previous night he had resisted using the word 'evil', because somehow that seemed too elemental for something as clinically calculating as the Westons' way of life, but moment by moment he was revising his opinion. He couldn't wait to get the hell out of there.

Finding a hair-tie in his pocket, he scraped back his mane as best he could and made for the door, snagging his back-pack on the way. His hand on the door panel, he cast his eye behind him to make sure he'd left none of his possessions when the cup caught his eye. There it stood, on the night-stand, the pink mug that Julie had so thoughtfully left for him after her failure to seduce him. Or be seduced? Which was it?

He went back and picked it up. A malted drink; had he really drunk that? Oh yeah, she was so insistent and he hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings.... There was a gritty residue at the bottom of the mug. He dabbed his forefinger into it and touched it to his tongue.

Blair made a face and spat. Behind the sweet maltiness, there was a bitter undertone. A drug? Crushed sleeping pills? That would explain the heavy slumber, the headache and the muzzy brain.

And if he'd been given sleeping pills, what had they done to Jim?

Headache forgotten, he threw himself out of the door and down the polished pine staircase, and was breathlessly grabbing his still damp coat from the hall stand when Louise suddenly appeared from the lounge doorway.

"Well, hello, sleepy-head! I do hope that long lie-in was a compliment to our bedroom! Did you have sweet dreams?"

Blair found he had to grasp hold of the newel post to steady himself. The hallway was shifting a little. Louise was looking smooth and elegant in a long riding skirt that almost touched the floor. In Blair's still-fuzzy vision, she looked like she was floating over the varnished wood. A sudden image of her, long-legged in her diaphanous night-gown, flashed through his memory.

What the hell are you doing here, Sandburg?

And Jim on that bed, waiting for her....

Dammit, Chief, I was desperate to get away from her!

He tried to compose himself.

"Louise, I'm so sorry to have overslept. That was really rude of me. And Jim must be about to kill me. He will have wanted to get that truck fixed now the wet weather's improved. Where is he, anyway?"

He strained his ears; no sign of Jim elsewhere in the house.

"Oh, Jim went out quite early," replied Louise breezily. It was as if the bizarre encounter in Jim's bedroom had never happened. "He went to fix the flat. Come and have some breakfast, or maybe I should say lunch!" She gave him a winning smile and indicated the kitchen. Blair stared at her.

"But it was two flats. There wouldn't have been any point just fixing one of them."

Louise waved her hand dismissively.

"Well, something like that. I think he's borrowing some tools from Burt. Maybe Burt found he had an extra tyre after all. I don't understand all that stuff, anyway."

I wouldn't bet on that, lady, thought Blair bitterly. Out loud, he said:

"It's very kind of you, Louise, but I really couldn't take any more of your hospitality. I really better get to Jim fast ... I mean, get to the truck fast to give Jim a hand with... well, with whatever it is he's doing. So thank you for the offer, and for everything you've done, but we really must get going now."

He held out his hand and Louise took it warmly. She wasn't looking now like the calculating temptress of the previous night, but Blair sensed once again the coldness of her eyes and had a sudden image of her as a spider in her web, relaxing in the corner now her work was done, and just waiting for the first victim to fall into it.

His stomach clenched; his concern for Jim deepened, but he couldn't pin it down. Then he reached out once again for his coat and as he did so he saw, on the hook next to his where Burt had hung Jim's coat the night before, a cap – Jim's battered Jags cap. He grabbed it quickly and stuffed it in his pocket, hoping that neither Louise nor Julie had noticed the move in the deliberately clumsy performance he made of putting on his coat. Then he bent down and grabbed his backpack. The room swam as he straightened up.

"Look," he improvised wildly, "it would be rude of me to leave without seeing Burt. I'm being too hasty here. Where are my manners? My mom would be so ashamed!" He gave Louise a smile he hoped was fake enough to rival her own.

"Oh, honey, don't worry about that. He'd be pleased you were on your way just like you wanted. But I think you'll get your wish anyway. I'm sure the two of them must be together. I haven't seen Burt for a couple of hours, now I think about it, so he's probably already out there helping Jim with the truck. Julie will run you down there. Julie! Here, please!"

The girl emerged from the lounge and stood quietly at Louise's side, still with the wide vacant eyes and the all-purpose smile. If she had any thoughts, bad or otherwise, about her encounter with Blair in his room the night before, it certainly didn't show in her face. But then, thought Blair, when did anything?

Louise put her arm around the girl warmly.

"You're going to do that, aren't you, dear? You can do that."

"I can do that," smiled Julie.

"That's really okay," began Blair. "It's barely a quarter of a mile down the track...."

"No, no, I insist!" returned Louise. "We thought that would be what you would want to do, to find Jim as soon as you woke, so she's all ready, aren't you, Julie?"

"I'm all ready!" said Julie happily.

Blair had the strangest feeling that the two women were somehow advancing on him down the hall way, as if they were lionesses moving towards their prey, beautiful heads held low, eyes focused on him. He found himself backing towards the door, now desperate to leave the house, even if Jim was still in the vicinity. At least if he could get to the truck he might be able to get the radio working, find the spare gun... Jesus, anything! Anything to get away from there!

Outside the air felt heavy with moisture. But there was that latent menace, too, still hanging in the atmosphere. Blair shivered. It was not just the chill mist; there seemed to be a definite presence there, like the one he had sensed the night before, the one Jim had tried to brush off.

"Remember, Julie," said Louise with a smile at the girl. "Take the 'Cruiser, and leave it where I told you. Have you got that?"

"I've got that," said Julie brightly.

"Then you've finished your chores."

"Then I'm finished," smiled Julie.

"Ah, okay, can we go?" Blair was hopping now by the side of one of the Landcruisers that was parked nose-out on the driveway, evidently anticipating a departure.

As Julie opened the driver's door, Blair jumped into the passenger seat, and gave Louise no more than a perfunctory wave as the 'Cruiser lumbered down the track and then dropped away from the house down the hillside.

As soon as he thought they were fully out of sight, Blair turned to Julie.

"Have you seen Jim, Julie? Do you know where he is?"

Julie turned her head momentarily towards Blair and then back again to face front.

"Jim," she repeated. "I'll take you to Jim."

"Where? Where is he? Is he all right?"

"I'll take you."

The 'Cruiser lurched over the rough ground to the bottom of the track. As Julie slowed over the last ruts, Blair impatiently grabbed the handbrake and brought the 'Cruiser to a stop. He reached out and took hold of the girl's shoulders, turning her to face him. She seemed barely perturbed.

"What's going on here, Julie? You aren't happy here, are you? Can you understand me, understand what I'm saying? Are the Westons mistreating you? You can come with us, we can help you!"

Julie merely smiled at him and shrugged her arm away from his grasp.

"Everything's fine. You can go now. Go and find Jim. He needs you."

Blair felt the sick lurch to his stomach again. Last night he could have maybe been persuaded that, as Jim had tried to argue, she was merely a disturbed teen in emotional retreat. But right now she seemed something else entirely. Something unnatural; flesh and blood, certainly, but more clockwork doll than unhappy youngster, a perception enhanced but the sing-song voice, which was now grating on him. He felt his patience and his self-possession failing.

"Julie, have you seen him? Have you seen Jim? Is something wrong?"

It was all he could do not to shout at her. His hands trembled; he was so close to shaking some sense out of her.

"Jim," she repeated, and this time that little flash of something, like the merest hint of a memory, passed across her eyes again. This time, Blair did shake her.

"Yes, *Jim*, Julie! Jim who was there last night and helped you when you fell! My friend! Where is he? Is he still at the house?"

Her eyes were longer blank; they looked troubled and fearful.

"At the house. Jim is at the house." She spoke slowly, with hesitation, unlike her usually crisp delivery.

Blair shook her again, hard.

"You've got to tell me Julie. Where is he? Is he hurt, is he in trouble?"

"Jim is at the house, at the house," she repeated. Then she gave a start and sat up even more rigidly in her seat. Like a film on water, the expression in her eyes changed with her sudden movement and she was back to the usual vacant stare.

"I know where Jim is. I have to take you to Jim," she said firmly, and restarted the car. Blair sat back, suddenly feeling drained of energy, but his passivity vanished when he realised she had turned left instead of right.

"Hey? The truck is that way! You have to turn the other way, Julie!"

He made a grab at the wheel again, but Julie put out a hand and gripped his arm with surprising strength.

"I know where to go," she said gravely. "We have to go there. Jim is there."

Blair sat back again, giving a fretful glance at the track that swept away in the other direction. They turned another corner and a half a mile or so further on, with rock walls now close to them on the right-hand side, Julie suddenly made a right turn and headed up a narrow, bumpy track that wound its way through spruce and boulders. A few moments later they emerged from the trees onto a rocky platform and Julie stopped the car. Blair looked at her, but her expression as usual gave no clues - it was the customary pleasant blankness. He grabbed his backpack and jumped out, swinging the bag onto his shoulders as he did so.

A quick glance showed Blair that they were now higher than the house. The main track had clearly been built around the edge of a deep gouge in the side of the mountain, describing a kind of arc. This promontory was at the opposite end of the arc from where the truck had come to grief; he could see the upper floors of the Westons' house looking out through the trees, and he could in fact see the truck, looking like a toy on the distant mountainside, much lower down. He didn't need Sentinel sight to work out that there was no movement there. No men at work, no Jim.

He heard Julie get out of the 'Cruiser and he turned to her in exasperation.

"Where are we? Why are we here?"

She smiled.

"Jim is here," she repeated, as if to a naughty child. She went to take his hand but he flinched away. His rebuff didn't cause her expression to change; she merely turned and walked towards the edge of the promontory.

"What the hell is this, Julie," he shouted at her departing figure. In the drama of leaving the house he had forgotten his headache, and here, in the heavy, moist and lowering clouds, it returned with a vengeance.

He rubbed his temples and tried to think straight. If Jim had got away from the Westons without him, where would he have gone? He may have wanted to avoid an obvious move to the truck, so might he have gone in the opposite direction? But if he had, why would he have climbed a quarter of a mile up that dizzying, jackrabbit run they had just negotiated? To look at the view?

Julie turned back to him.

"Jim is here," she repeated, pointing to the edge of the cliff.

Blair's heart plummeted to the bottom of his stomach.

Oh, sweet Jesus, she didn't mean that? Surely she didn't mean he'd gone over? Not over there!

All caution abandoned, he rushed to the edge, teetering there in horror. The drop was an almost sheer wall of scrub and rough rock, running down to a tumble of sharp, jagged boulders of basalt some eighty feet below. If Jim had gone over there, could he have survived that fall? Could anyone?

He strained his eyes to see far below, trying to make out whether a much-loved form was indeed broken and torn on the jagged mess at the base of the cliff. There were shapes there that were not rocks, certainly, things that looked like twisted metal and unexpected colours amongst the starkness of the dark basalt. He opened his mouth to shout - stupidly, futilely, to call out his friend's name - but a sudden movement at his side made him turn.

Julie was there, her hands outstretched. Julie was there, and before he could duck or dodge or sidestep her, those hands gave him a sharp push. With his arms flailing, he was over the side of the cliff, falling, falling. He screamed; of course he screamed. He screamed in sheer bloody terror and the certain knowledge that there was no-one there to save him.

He grabbed uselessly at razor-sharp edges that were flying past him as he hurtled downwards. Despite the hopelessness, his body twisted into every contortion possible as he instinctively reached out, flailing at the cliff side which was nevertheless just out of reach. Falling, falling, air rushing past him, the world around him a blur of movement....

And then the backpack caught on a piece of scrub, wrenching his shoulder backwards but checking his fall, however minutely. Still down, down, and the backpack snagged again, this time on a jagged piece of rock jutting out from the cliff face. And this time Blair's scream registered the awful pain as his already torn shoulder took the full weight of his tumbling body.

The caught strap gave way, but it had held enough seconds for momentum to swing Blair's torso against the side of the cliff with bone-shaking impact. If there was more pain, he didn't feel it. Now he had touched dirt, every part of his consciousness was at work directing his hands to grab at anything that could slow his descent. He slid down the final yards of the cliff side, still scrabbling in panic, his hands still reaching upwards, fingers scraping at the unyielding rock, trying to find some purchase that would check his fall.

He fell backwards in the last few feet, landing hard on his back against a slab-sided boulder. The blow winded him and he lay there gasping for breath, with his chest in spasm, until he could at last draw a breath. The breath hurt like hell. Everything hurt like hell.

He grabbed the side of the rock to pull himself up onto his feet, panting harshly. The boulder had a wickedly sharp edge along its top. He gazed at it stupefied. If Julie had pushed him harder he would have landed on that...

Julie! He suddenly remembered the sequence of events; the cliff edge, him staring in horror at the ground for Jim's broken body; the noise to his right and turning to see her there, her hands outstretched; the moment of disbelief as she pushed him, the terror of being unable to regain his balance; over the edge and plummeting downwards....

If he hadn't turned, if Julie had managed to give him a hard push in the middle of his back, which she had clearly intended to do, then he would have been far out from the cliff in mid-air, with nothing for him or the backpack to catch hold of. He would have landed on the boulder and it would have broken his back, at the very least. It looked like it could have cut him in two.

Christ! Julie! Where was she? He looked upwards, pain searing through him as he pushed his punished muscles to change direction. His sight was hazy, something in his eyes; blood. He wiped distractedly at his face.

Dear god, she was still there, looking down at him. What should he do? Run? Hide? Shout for help to a psychopath?

Too late to make a decision. Far above, he saw her step further towards the edge, then with outstretched arms, she toppled, head-first, over the cliff. He screamed, just with the sheer terror at the sight, and every fibre of his body struggled to get away, get away from that falling body, get away from the soulless killer who was throwing herself off the cliff-edge to kill him again. He scrabbled backwards, his eyes still fixed on the falling girl. Her body somersaulted as she fell; there were no cries, no flailing arms. She fell through the air to the jagged rocks below with the same calm emptiness that she had served ice cream, sat expectantly in his bed, performed all her tasks at the house.

Close to the ground she hit a layer of the jagged boulders broadside, her head and shoulders taking the brunt of the fall, and the force of it made her body bounce up again – arms and legs now flailing with the force of the blow – and away from the big rocks to fall further down the slope. Blair hid his face from the final impact as she hit the ground some twenty feet away from him. There was no last cry, no sound other than the muffled *whump* as she landed on her back amongst a heap of rubble.

For long moments he just stared at her motionless form on the ground. Then he inched forward. He was irrationally fearful of this broken shape. He hardly dared to make a sound in case she leapt into life again. She lay there splayed on the dirt, her back and legs twisted into unnatural positions, and he could see she was clearly mortally injured. There was blood all round her head. Mere inches away from her, he realised she was still breathing. Again, he recoiled unconsciously in shock, and then edged forward. Her head was twisted to one side so she was looking directly at him, and the blue eyes were closed.

But her head, oh god, her head! Her hair, no, that's wasn't hair – something artificial – her wig was askew. A large part of her shaven scalp was ripped away and the bone beneath was shattered. He could see the brain matter exposed, and something else; there in amongst the mess of tissue there was a small metal box, not much larger than a matchbox, but he could see small wires protruding and snaking away into her brain. He stomach heaved, but he felt compelled to put his hand out to touch it.

The moment his fingers touched the metal – hot, bloody – Julie's eyes snapped open. He leapt back in terror, but no other part of her body moved. Her eyes were fixed on him, but they looked just as they had done, not ten minutes before; soulless, not a hint of life or vitality in them. Then she opened her mouth and spoke.

"I've done all my chores now," she said. Blair heard a terrified sob, and realised it was himself, crying now uncontrollably in fear and shock.

Then, for a final time, her eyes flickered and that strange elusive flash of fear and memory appeared once more. For a second, Julie looked at Blair and her face, torn though it was, registered emotion; it was confusion, and terror.

"Mom?" She asked, faintly. Then she died.

Blair saw the moment her life slipped out of her. He saw her stop breathing; he saw her eyes fade and her jaw go slack. Out of reflex he reached for her wrist to feel her pulse, though there was nothing to find, but his eyes never left the metal box. As Julie's body finally relaxed in death, he saw the small object slip free of its moorings in the grey brain tissue and drop to the ground.

That was the final straw for Blair. Transfixed with horror and disgust, he scabbled backwards over the rough ground, tried to stand, and saw the sky go black around him. He crashed to the ground in a dead faint.

PART 5

**...“Relax” said the night man,
“we are programmed to receive”...**

His hearing returned first. It was a comforting sound, a pen scratching on paper, sips from a coffee cup. Sandburg, in the loft. He took a deep, reviving breath, but stopped halfway as his chest met a constriction. It prompted him to open his eyes.

His vision cleared slowly and he focused on a sterile white room. It was long and narrow, with a low ceiling. There were shelves all along the walls bearing jars and bottles, and to his left there was a table - something like a surgical table, used in operations. His feeling of dread grew, and he looked down at his own body.

He was restrained on a similar table with broad leather straps buckled tight, across his chest, his thighs and calves, his arms, his neck. He could turn his head and flex his fingers and toes, but that was about it. Whatever he'd been given - whenever that had been - had worn off, as the paralysis had thankfully receded, but he remained equally helpless.

The coffee-drinking writer was, of course, not Blair. Burt Weston sat in a white coat at one of the counters, industriously writing notes. He must have sensed Jim's wakefulness or heard his small movements, as his head turned and he smiled blandly.

“Ah, you're back with us, excellent! You see, I don't like to use too much of the nerve agent. Prolonged paralysis is not good for the body, and so can rather compromise the fitness of the test subject. I'll put you under again for the fitting stage. At that point I need the flexibility in your limbs to test that all the signals are working properly. And this time you won't go out completely, just not be able to move of your own accord, so I'll be able to test your brain waves in a conscious state.”

Jim's response was reflexive and predictable.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

It surprised him rather that he could talk again, and the surprise must have shown in his face, as Burt raised a warning hand.

“Please don't try shouting for help. It would be entirely pointless. There's no one here who will pay the slightest bit of attention, you will just create a very annoying noise and I will be forced to drug you again.”

“Where's Blair?”

“Oh, yes, Dr Sandburg. Nowhere he's going to bother us now, thankfully.”

Jim strained at his bonds.

“You bastard! Where is he?”

"All in good time." Burt left the workbench and sauntered over to where Jim lay, his hands nonchalantly in the pockets of his white coat. "You know, we could hardly believe our luck when you two landed at our door yesterday. Your name was familiar to us with moment we saw your ID. The great Jim Ellison, celebrated in the Police Department for his extraordinary rate of case resolution and his extreme bravery. Quite a superman, aren't you? Plus there's your exemplary military record to consider as well. And of course your partner. What cop teams up with a scientist, and a social scientist, at that? Ridiculous!"

Burt took his hands out of his pockets and Jim saw he was holding a scalpel. Its razor-like blade glittered in the harsh lights of the laboratory. Burt sat down on a stool next to Jim's table, his thumb playing idly over the sharp edge, and considered him.

"Yes, you really are a perfect specimen. You see, we've tried a number of variants on various test subjects. Now we're pretty much on the final leg, so to speak, we needed a really excellent basis for our implant. Someone with your skills, your intelligence, your resourcefulness - you're just exactly what I wanted."

"Where's Blair Sandburg," growled Jim yet again, pulling against the straps.

"I'm coming to that", said Burt pleasantly. "You see, the media furore about you may well have died down, but in academic circles, the interest was always there. Oh, the quality of young Dr Sandburg's work was recommendation enough, and he made very persuasive case. I recognised him, of course. One academic fraud easily recognises another, you know..." Weston smiled nastily.

"I feel a sort of kindred spirit with your annoying little friend," he continued. "because I was hounded out of practice by people who didn't understand my work or its significance. And to a lesser degree, that has happened to your Dr Sandburg as well. Clearly his work was of exceptional quality, and completely well-founded, even if he did have to resort to that ridiculous cover-up. I see he has been rehabilitated to some degree, but mud sticks, I know."

Burt got up again and went back to his coffee. Jim strained helplessly at his bonds, but there was no loosening of the leather, and all the while the feeling of dread grew in his stomach - fear for the both of them.

"Tell me what you've done with him!" he shouted. Burt ignored him.

"Once they see what I've developed here over the past few years," he continued, draining his coffee, "there will be no debate about my importance in the scientific world. I shall be vindicated, and you will play your own small part in that, Detective!"

He bent over the table again, smiling downwards at the desperate man lying helpless there.

"It's quite clear to me that you do have heightened senses and that is why your work with the police is so exceptional. And why, I presume, Dr Sandburg continues to accompany you in your work. Louise seems convinced there is another reason why you two are together, but even if that's true, it's irrelevant to our work here.

"Louise wanted to keep you both. She likes her playthings. But young Blair was really too irritating to have around for long. Too much thought there, you see, too many questions. He

would always be annoying me even if he couldn't speak. So we really had to get rid of him. And it's not as if you'll notice that he's gone, once we've completed the procedure."

Jim stared at him in almost unbearable horror.

"What have you done with him, you fucking monster?" he breathed.

Burt moved to a small monitor on the far counter.

"I'm sure you've worked out how many surveillance cameras we have around here. They're very useful. We have them set upon the perimeter of our property as well. It always helps to know who's coming. When we needed a place to dispose of our failed experiments and obsolete kit, we discovered that quite close to here there's the most wonderful sheer drop off the mountain down to a very rocky gully in between the cliffs. Send anything off there and it really doesn't come back. We did test this empirically, by the way."

He fiddled with some switches, still talking.

"We set a camera up there as well, to record what was happening. We usually get our subjects to jump off the cliff themselves, you see. Suicide is a pretty convincing test of how well our control devices work. Even if the subject survives the fall, the undoubted serious injuries will bring the bears and foxes and suchlike, which remove the evidence and save us the tedious task of digging holes for burials."

Jim felt his bowels turn to ice. Bile rose in his throat.

"Come to think of it," Burt continued calmly, "your young friend would probably have felt it most fitting that he should be joined with the environment in his passing, as he seemed so intent on the joyous link between man and nature last night."

Burt smiled at him, a humourless smile.

"Julie is the latest of our subjects to be terminated in that way," he continued. "She was a very good variant. I worked out most of the bugs in the system with her particular implant. But there were additional problems - that interference with other radio signals you observed last night, for instance. I've ironed that out in the latest version, but as a subject herself, Julie was, ultimately, fatally flawed: quite literally!" He laughed reminiscently. "She was remarkably good entertainment when she was here, for both me and Louise, but had outlived her usefulness. She left this lunchtime with your friend."

Jim now felt confused.

"Left? I thought you meant...."

"Oh yes, I mean they took a walk in the woods, as we call it. Quite a short walk, it turns out! Look, I have the footage for you to see. Shall I bring the screen nearer? Oh, how silly of me, of course you don't need that! You'll be able to see perfectly well from there, won't you?"

He smiled and switched on the monitor. The little screen resolved itself into a paused picture from a videotape - some kind of cliff edge. Burt pressed the play button and the image began to move. Jim saw a Landcruiser draw up, and then figures got out- Blair! Blair and Julie....

There were talking, clearly, but there was no sound. He homed in on the image as much as he could, trying to focus on Blair's lips to make out his words, but there was little opportunity for study. The figures started moving abruptly, both of them drawing closer to the cliff edge. He saw Blair rush forward, and Jim tensed even more in his restraints. His friend paused at the top of the cliff looking down. He didn't see the girl walking up behind him, but Jim did. He arched at his bonds in desperation, screaming a futile warning.

Jim saw him fall, and screamed again, writhing on his bed. He screamed for the little figure on the computer screen, who toppled over the deadly rocks and fell – down, down, until the tops of the pines in the valley obscured the camera's, and Jim's, view. The video was only seconds-long, but it was enough for Jim to see how sheer the cliff was, how Blair clawed with all his might to try to reach some handhold as he plummeted downwards. He saw his friend's mouth opened in a cry and his eyes wide with terror. Then he was gone.

“Ah,” said Burt, who had been watching him closely, as if his reaction was merely part of an exercise in scientific observation, “you really did care deeply for him, didn't you? So Louise was right. Never mind, it'll all be over soon.”

Jim still twisted hysterically within his leather bonds, his chest heaving with the effort. His voice was hoarse with emotion when he spoke.

“When I get free, you bastard, I'm going to rip your heart out with my bare hands. Your whore wife's too.”

Burt looked at him indulgently.

“But don't you get it yet, Jim? When I finally set you free, you won't want to.”

He turned back to the screen.

“Oh, look! Here's another one!”

And Jim watched numbly as Julie pitched headfirst off the cliff, following Blair. He closed his eyes.

“Let's watch again, shall we?” asked Burt with a leer. He heard the tape screech backwards and saw the obscenity of a dead man levitating at high speed up the sheer cliff and walking backwards to a vehicle that suddenly appeared. Then Burt ran the tape forward again. Jim forced himself to focus on Blair's face as his friend fell once more, and, in a macabre joke, Burt paused the tape just as Blair got to the top of the trees, his arms and legs akimbo in the air as he fell. Jim felt the nausea rise again.

“Has anyone told you, you're certifiably insane? When they get you, you'll be in a straightjacket for the rest of your life. Except I'm going to get you first.”

“I keep telling you,” said Burt, moving back to him, but not switching off the monitor - Jim had finally to avert his eyes – “the procedure I'll be undertaking on you will leave you with no emotions, memories, or indeed what some people refer to as a conscience. You will be perfectly free, free from all personal thoughts or feelings. No need for decisions, for choices. Effectively you will feel nothing anymore. Oh, you will feel pain and discomfort when it occurs, that's quite a good control on how well the device is working, in fact. But it won't stop

you functioning. You will go on forever, without any complaint and in total obedience to what your controller tells you."

"And you invented this insanity?"

"Well, yes, Louise and I together. You see, we pondered the state of the world today - so many poorly-educated and unproductive lives. And so many others who are simply contrary and refuse to settle in any kind of ordered social system - too critical, too argumentative. Any government would be delighted to have the possibility of removing these burdens and boosting their countries' productivity and global strength at one stroke."

"What! Programming people?"

"Yes, indeed. That's exactly what we have developed. A small brain implant which renders the subject completely obedient. It could be applied to socio-economic groups as a whole, or to certain individuals. The high-functioning humans that result will be a productive element in society and totally loyal. And also very economically efficient. The future's not robots, you know. Good heavens, all that raw material, and so many things to go wrong! All very expensive. But we have an endless supply of human beings. If they break down there's always another at minor incremental cost."

"And it's been you, abducting hikers and vagrants around here, isn't it?" Jim's brain kicked into gear. "They've been your test subjects all this time!"

"Oh yes, that was the beauty of being in this place, you see. We are so remote, no one really pays us any attention, and there are always a few people who wander through who simply won't be missed, or at least won't be once a fairly credible explanation is given for their disappearance, like they got lost hiking and eaten by a bear!"

He laughed at his own joke.

"Julie was hiking with her little boyfriend. We considered he wasn't such a good subject, so he took a walk quite quickly. Most of our subjects we pick up some way from here - hardly sensible to draw attention to ourselves, after all! We would then drive them back. Once or twice, if they had cars, we've even towed them back and pushed the thing off the cliff as well. Very satisfying! And of course, the test subjects we selected in this way were, generally speaking, the sort of hopeless wastrels this device will help remove from society, so at least by participating they've now contributed something to the development of science with their sorry lives."

"You monster. You fucking monster." Jim could hardly speak in his despair.

"Yes, well, my point exactly if that's all you can bring to the debate, Detective. But to continue, this is why you are such a find for us. It really was a happy accident, literally so, that brought you to us, you know. We had left the stinger out by mistake, in all that bad weather. We'd just been testing some signals with it."

Burt moved back to his work desk and started opening some small vials.

"We are really at the final stage of the work on mind control now. The device is pretty nigh perfect. Then you walked right through our door, what serendipity! Your physical condition,

your level of intelligence and strength of will are, without a doubt, of a much higher standard than those in the social groups this device will be targeting. So if the level of control in the device works on you, I feel that will be an extremely good litmus test for its application to the rest of the population."

He started to fill some syringes from the vials, inserting a fine needle in each and withdrawing a clear liquid.

"Your heightened senses, too," he continued, "will be of exceptional value, when it comes to refining the abilities of the subject under the control of the device. I foresee a very productive time working on you here, while I finish off this fine-tuning. Louise will absolutely love it as well. I think you're exactly her type, you know?"

Jim saw the pieces fall into place and, as fantastical and horrific as they sounded, they made perverted sense. He could see governments of all hues being severely tempted by the possibilities presented by this obscenity. And that would be the end of the human race. No emotion, no feelings, no thought, no soul.

But that was hardly going to be his concern; he was going to be turned into a machine with no thoughts or feelings, anyway. And he almost laughed, a snort of hysteria escaping him. Because that would be right on target, wouldn't it? Because he had long known, deep down, that without Blair Sandburg he would be an empty shell, and now Blair Sandburg was dead on the sharp rocks of a Cascade mountain.

"And then?" he asked flatly.

"Oh, long before then we will have a general buyer, and I expect they will want to take you on as well, once that final testing is complete. Louise will probably be keen to have something new to play with by then, and you would be an excellent test bed for any further fine-tuning clients would need."

Jim laughed harshly.

"You think people won't put two and two together? You think you can sell a lobotomised Cascade cop to some institution and they won't work out who I am? You said it yourself: I've got a record. People know me!"

"Oh Jim," said Burt reprovingly, as if to a naughty child, "that drug must have addled your brain. You really think that whatever government or agency gets you with this prototype device will give a damn about you or where you've come from? They'll be delighted to have you and to keep you. But don't torture yourself with that. I promise you, it will all be so easy, quite soon now."

He tapped the syringes and nodded to himself as he regarded their contents.

"This one," he mused, waving one of the needles, "is the nerve agent. I have to be very careful with this stuff. Too much, and in the wrong place such as a major artery, would produce almost immediate cardiac arrest. The effect of the paralysis on the heart muscle would be too extreme, you see? I'll administer that in a couple of hours or so, as soon as everything else is ready. You need to be nicely relaxed when I do the procedure. Although

you won't be able to move by yourself, you'll be able to see and hear. And feel as well, I'm afraid, but the pain will be relatively short-lived, I assure you."

He walked over to the table again, where Jim, barely listening to him, was writhing in his restraints and trying by brute strength to force the leather free in his agony of fear and rage and helplessness.

"As soon as the device is embedded in your brain, everything will be just fine, but I need your brain activity in a conscious state to ensure it's all fitting just right, you see? So while the procedure is going on, don't torture yourself trying to move. Your motor function will be suppressed by the neuro-agent; it simply won't obey those signals from your brain."

Head on one side, he considered Jim thoughtfully.

"Right now I think it's best if I put you back to sleep again for a while. You're just getting pointlessly distressed and that's no good for the blood pressure. It may affect the test results later."

He reached out and brushed his hand over the right side of Jim's scalp, Jim trying but failing to flinch away.

"I won't have to do much hair cutting there, will I?" he said, with a wink.

Jim saw the needle approach but he turned his head away, and instead he stared at the little monitor, and the frozen image of a falling man. As his muscles slumped and his vision dimmed he knew there was no hope anymore. He concentrated on Blair, and dialled his senses down until the drug was irrelevant and all he remembered was Blair flying, flying to freedom from a twisted, broken world.

It was the rain starting again, a gentle but persistent drizzle, that woke him finally. It took him a moment to register where he was, that all that had happened hadn't been a particularly vivid nightmare. But no, the sharp pain in his chest when he breathed and the deep ache in his shoulders assured him that he had indeed taken that fall. He lay there for a while sprawled on the ground, just staring at the dirt and grasses right front of his face and willing the whole mess to go away. Eventually he forced himself to turn his head, with a fair degree of discomfort.

On the boulder above him sat a large black bird, with something in its mouth. He started up, a kick of primal fear firing his nervous system. The bird squawked, opened its wings and took off, rising sluggishly on labouring wings, and pulling away to settle on the rocks higher on the cliff. He squinted to focus again. There were several of these black birds – crows? ravens? – on the rocks. He was all at once conscious of a sickening smell, one he hadn't registered in the pain and horror earlier, but in a second's clarity of thought it all came flooding back.

"Jim is there."

Oh, sweet Jesus, he hadn't looked, he hadn't checked to see whether Jim was amongst the rubble!

He dragged himself to his feet, leaning on a boulder. Once righted, he found he could move a little better, though his breathing was no easier. In growing panic, he scanned the ground around him. He saw Julie's body lying close by, but he couldn't bear to look at her again, so her turned in the opposite direction .

The unexpected shapes and colours he had glimpsed from the top of the cliff now resolved themselves. There was car wreckage strewn around – not much, maybe a couple of small vehicles. But everywhere, in different spots along the cliff base, were dead bodies; all in different stages of decay, most of them dismembered, clothing torn away, their flesh ripped and bones exposed. Wild animals had been at work, the raven for one species alone.

There was a mix of sexes, and a mix of sizes and shapes, from what he could work out from the remains, with his hand over his mouth and nose and fighting the urge to vomit. Their clothing mainly looked like outdoor, hiking stuff. He moved as fast as he could from one side of the cliff-base to the other, making himself count the bodies; about a dozen, he estimated from the main bits and pieces scattered around. But there was nothing in this pile of human death and suffering that he could recognise as Jim Ellison.

Then he walked the perimeter of the site, telling himself to treat it like an archaeological dig, and checked twice before he allowed himself to relax, at least partially. Jim might be somewhere else in mortal peril but, as far as Blair could see, he wasn't crumpled and dead in an impromptu charnel-house at the bottom of a Cascade mountain.

Finally able to think clearly about his situation, he moved away from the cliff-base and into the stunted trees and scrub that were growing a hundred yards or so from the cliff. There, the air was fresher and he found breathing more pleasant, if not easier. He took a moment to scan his own injuries. His shoulder, although seriously wrenched, wasn't dislocated; he had numerous lacerations on his hands and arms, and blood had been running down his legs under his jeans from painful scrapes, but all these injuries must have been fairly superficial as they had mostly by now stopped bleeding, except for a long, rather deep gash in his right forearm that still seeped blood.

He brushed away dried blood from around his face and eyes – a gash in his scalp. His head hurt but his vision seemed okay. So, again, hopefully nothing major had happened to his skull or spine in the fall; certainly his back and legs, though aching, seemed entire. The random twist that had thrown him back against the side of the cliff must have been enough to change the speed and trajectory of his descent, and slow him down sufficiently so that major injury had been avoided, though it was still a goddamn miracle.

His chest was more of an issue, he knew; he prodded experimentally at his ribs and concluded, from the pain he encountered and the somewhat squishy feeling, that a number were bruised or cracked on both sides. So far, no apparent internal injuries resulting from that injury or from the fall in general, thank the gods. Amazing but extremely welcome news, though if he was to function with any semblance of speed and agility, not to mention avoid further internal problems, he needed to do something about the ribs.

He contemplated the truck. He couldn't go back up the cliff, and anyway he wouldn't want to go waltzing back down the road towards the Westons' house again. But if he could negotiate the valley below the house and come up on the other side of the arc between

the cliff and the house, he could climb up near the truck and hopefully remain unobserved. Jim's assessment that the Westons had tracked them before they got to the house, and that they could probably track them everywhere else, weighed heavily on his mind, but he concluded that if he could physically make it across the valley, then he would consider the options when he got to the other side.



It wasn't easy going. The terrain itself wasn't too bad, but the pain in his limbs, his head, and the ache every time he breathed were debilitating. Half way through the forest that grew below the roadway, he discovered a small stream surging through the rocks. It was a welcome chance to wash his face and to drink deeply, and once refreshed, he found the walking a little easier. Nevertheless the trek took him two or three hours at least, with frequent stops for a rest along the way. From what light there was available when he peered through the trees at the other side of the mountain, he gauged it was early evening.

The trusty backpack had been eviscerated long before for sustenance and any other form of comfort, and it had provided a few scraps of material for bandages to cover the most persistent of his wounds. An ancient cereal bar had been forced down, and as unpleasant as it had been, and not really wanted, Blair knew that a little nourishment would help his energy and concentration. What else had been in the backpack that was smash-able had duly been smashed by the fall; not much, but the contents had included his cell phone.

He knew, though, there were other potential options if he could get to the truck. There was the truck radio, though the signal had, according to the Westons, been down the night before. And there was Jim's back-up cell phone, little-used and purchased by Blair on the

basis that if Jim dropped his phone as often as he dropped his gun then a phone in reserve might be of assistance once in a while.

And there was also Jim's back-up gun, cannily hidden within the driver's door trim, and a neat way of getting the drop on bad guys, especially if Jim's regular gun had already gone AWOL. Blair had had occasion to use it more than once. All these things gave Blair some reason to hope, plus there was also Jim's basic First Aid kit in the tool box, with at least some painkillers, bottled water and bandages.

When he got to roughly the position of the truck, he edged carefully up the slope towards the vehicle. It all seemed so tantalisingly close; the truck was there, looking solid and dependable, even gleaming a little as the weak light hit the raindrops on its chrome. It promised safety and escape, but he knew he was going nowhere without Jim, and in any case, he had to find a way of getting to the vehicle without triggering any more of the Westons' "little toys."

Head peeking over the edge of the track, and perched uncomfortably on the scree, he contemplated the options. The Westons could both hear and see him if they wanted to. He had to count on cameras being trained on the track day and night. But it was likely that they weren't actually watching the feedback constantly. They probably just reactivated the stinger, and it would be the stinger that told them someone was in their territory.

Maybe the stinger normally just sent a signal, rather than ripped people's tyres to shreds. That would make some practical sense; they wouldn't necessarily be watching any cameras if there hadn't been a warning signal. So as long as he watched where the stinger had been located, and didn't move the truck, show a light, make a noise – or maybe just breathe - then he might well evade their attention.

He tried not to think about why they had left the truck there. Someone had clearly towed it a short distance away from its original position, he could see that from the tracks in the mud. He hoped it wasn't a tethered goat to draw him in. Maybe they hadn't had the time to drag it up the track to the house; it was pretty muddy and difficult ground, after all. Maybe if another vehicle did pass on this god-forsaken track, the occupants would think it was just somebody parked up and gone hiking. In any case, he couldn't afford to worry about that now; in his injured condition, the truck was his only hope.

He decided to make even more of a loop before he hit the track, coming up well behind the truck, and the stinger, and then climbing into the trees to circumvent where he remembered the stinger device had been. Sure enough, as he clambered along the slope, he could see the small metal box Jim had found the night before, clamped to the trunk of one of the spruces near the track.

A few minutes later, he was making a dash across the track to reach the tailgate of the invalid truck, and scrabbling for the spare set of keys in his backpack. He opened the tailgate carefully and slid in.

Getting over the back seat to the front was completely beyond him; the pressure on his ribs as he tried to haul himself over was too much to bear. He dropped back again, and concentrated on the first aid kit. Here there was aspirin and codeine, and he downed three of those, easing them on their way with a bottle of mineral water from their limited camping

rations. He wiped an antiseptic dressing across the leaking cut on his forearm that still oozed nastily and found another dressing to tape over it.

Then the bandages. Luckily Jim always planned for a disaster of biblical proportions when kitting out the truck, so there were several rolls of sturdy bandage, and he stripped off his coat and shirts and started rolling one, with great difficulty, around his midriff. His breathing sounded loud in the confines of the truck, harsh and laboured. He strained his ears to listen for any significant footsteps on the track.

His hands were shaking so much that the bandage wrapping needed several attempts, and the final fastening with stout safety pins almost finished him off completely. It was agony bending forward to find the head of the pins and clip them. But finally it was done. He sat back for several minutes, panting hard, then took another swig of the water bottle. Breathing now somewhat more easily with the bandage supporting his ribs, he rummaged in the food box again, finding a tuna sandwich left over from their driving lunch. He forced himself to eat it, though his stomach protested; he knew he needed more nourishment if he was to try to carry on.

The sandwich finished, he felt strong enough to attempt the front seat again. It wasn't fun, but this time he managed to slide himself over the top of the seats and land in the front, where he reached immediately for the glove box. There, taped to the interior, was the spare cell phone, and he switched it on; dead, of course. He rummaged in the glove box again and found the charger. His fingers still trembling, he plugged it into the battery and watched the little bars light up. How long, how long?

He let his hands run longingly over the truck's radio. It wouldn't reach Cascade PD frequencies here, but would pick up pretty much anything else around; ranger station, local deputies, even any logging companies active in the area. But he couldn't risk it. The Westons had their own radio and he was pretty sure they would be monitoring anything on the airwaves to make sure their nasty secret stayed secret. And also, he realised with a jolt, maybe to pinpoint their next victims.

He sat quietly in the dark interior as the little cell phone built up its muscles, and forced his brain to function properly again after the panic and pain of the last many hours.

What the hell had been going on here? Burt Weston's, or rather, West's work before his disgrace had ostensibly been in auto-suggestion and the control of phobias, but had quickly spiralled out into mind control of a different nature, one where the patient was placed in a state which made them highly suggestible, and hence subservient to their therapist, their controller by any other name.

When the families of several patients complained to the medical regulators about West's possible methods, the shit really hit the fan. Opinion, both academic and public, had found the concept of such elemental control of one human being by another abhorrent. There had also been suggestions, though never substantiated, that in this state patients had been molested, or at the very least had been made to perform tasks that their knowing selves would never have willingly carried out. Having seen the dynamics of the West household, Blair had a strong feeling that Louise might have been behind that element of the 'tests'.

So West went quiet and disappeared from the academic scene, and the press finally lost interest. And now he and his lovely murderous wife pop up in the wilds of the Cascades.... Blair's mind fitted more of the jigsaw together. If West was continuing his research in some way, then a remote area would allow him privacy from the opinions and regulations of the saner part of humanity.

But he needed material for his experiments, and people weren't thick on the ground in this kind of area; even any locals, such as they were, would be quickly missed. Ah, but if you targeted the itinerants - the hikers, the backpackers, the lone walkers and free spirits on their road-trips into the wilderness - well, those would be disappearances that could easily be put down to exposure or animal attack. For a while at least, because even now the authorities were concerned about the number of unexplained disappearances in this remote region, hence the PD's rumoured new investigation, the one Jim had mentioned on the trip up there.

Was it entirely fair, Blair asked himself, that it was he and Jim who had to land right in the whole sorry mess? Could that have not have been handed out, in the interests of fairness, to some other pair of poor saps?

Haven't we done enough? he mused plaintively, gazing upwards at the truck roof. *Haven't we disposed of enough psychos and sickos and cold blooded killers? Couldn't we have a break for once?*

And especially since it was so necessary for Jim to get a proper rest and for them.... oh, for them to reconnect, have time to enjoy each other's company without having to worry where the next threat to life and limb was coming from?

He had spent so long looking forward to this trip and the chance to unwind in such lovely and primal surroundings, and for all his griping, he was sure Jim had been secretly pleased to be going as well, not that he would really admit it. There was something in the way that Jim looked at him from time to time, like there were things to say that he couldn't find the space in their hectic lives to take a deep breath and talk about.

And there was stuff on Blair's chest that he wanted a chance to open up about, too; about burying the past, about embracing the future, about finding out what future Jim had in mind. He had hoped maybe this festival would have given them that breathing space to sort it all out. Some hopes, eh?

But hey, let's get back to the present, Sandburg! Okay, concentrate.

West's work on auto-suggestion and mind control had found an unholy alliance in Louise's talent for electronic devices, if the evil little box within Julie's skull was any indication. Maybe now, West had made the jump from psychological techniques to the purely brutal, involving the insertion of a device into the patient - or rather, victim - with that device taking instructions from the controller, removing the patient's own will and making them behave in exactly the way their controller wanted.

Julie's own consciousness kept breaking through, though. That little episode at the dinner table - some interference with the other electronic stuff, maybe? And those little flashes of

cognition when, just for a split second, he could have sworn he had seen a frightened girl staring back at him.

Julie had had her uses but she wasn't a complete success, it would seem; hence her nose-dive off the cliff after she'd completed the last of her "chores". He shivered again as he remembered the sing-song words. Thinking back to the horrors he'd found at the bottom of the cliff, it seemed likely that it had been the Wests' dumping ground for their failed experiments, or subjects that had served their purpose.

And this brought him back to Jim. Jim had not been there; it had been a ruse to get rid of Blair, too. But the Wests needed a new subject, and who better than an intelligent, physically perfect specimen in the prime of life... Yeah, okay, Sandburg, enough with the hero-worship already.

But seriously, Jim would be an excellent source of test material - for as long as he had a use. And ... *Jesus God!*... the realisation flooded back into Blair's consciousness, making him shake all over - what if they'd already implanted the little metal box?

He forced himself to be calm. The little cell phone looked like it might be able to support a minute or two, and he really didn't want to be lingering. He decided to give it a few more moments, and reached over to the driver's door, pulling back the trim and ripping a small package from where it had been taped - the back-up hand gun. He tested the slide and checked the magazine - a full clip. Locking the safety back on, he slipped the gun into his pants pocket, grabbed the little phone and slipped out of the passenger door, it being on the far side of the truck and less visible from the house.

Still no sign of detection. He scrambled up into the woods again and made his way as fast as he could bear back along the hillside, retracing their route up the mountain the previous evening. Then Jim's cell phone had failed, and the Wests had put that down to the storm; just like their radio, they had claimed. Well, Blair was not so convinced by that story now, but the signal in the mountains was notoriously difficult, and he was also concerned that the Wests' radio-tracking might be able to pick up his mobile signal as well. He wanted to get as far away as he could from the house before he tried anything.

It took him a half-hour of walking but finally he could bear it no longer. He had descended onto the track and rounded several curves where the rock had risen high and sheer above him. Surely that could be a baffle between him and the house?

He faced outwards, over the treetops and in the vague direction of Cascade, and pressed the phone into life. The little screen woke up with its eerie green light, but no sign of a signal....

Blair's heart fell. He walked back along the track again, superstitiously waving the phone above his head as if to pick up any passing radio wave. Then, round the next bluff, a little symbol lit up in the right-hand corner of the screen. He stared at it for a moment, hypnotised, expecting it to flicker off again, but no. It stayed there - not strong, but a couple of bars at least. And what was that he'd heard? That the bars didn't really signify the strength of the signal - it was just a marketing device?

With shaking hands he punched in a familiar number and listened for the sound of a connection.

Three rings, four rings.

Please god, he's not gone home yet. Let him be there still, working on that budget we left him with.

Seven rings, eight....

"Banks....."

PART 6

...They stab it with their steely knives...

The man on the bed woke to a face looming over him – a face in a white surgical mask. He strained to move his head away, but the face stayed right where it was. The man tensed every muscle and tendon that he had to protect himself, to curl inwards, to roll away, anything ... but the face still stared at him, exactly where it had been.

He opened his mouth to cry out but he could find no mouth, no voice. He heard the hum of the fluorescent light, the hiss of the burner on the far bench, the whirr of the extractor fan that took the burner's heat away from the laboratory. He smelt a bitter concoction of unknown chemicals, and heard a sigh as the man who hovered over him exhaled. He felt the brush of that breath on his skin, the roughness of leather straps against his chest, and the strange, sucking feeling of fabric patches and electrodes over his heart and at his temples.



He forced his limbs to move; he could do nothing.

He stared at the masked face, incapable of blinking it away. He fought to form a thought in his head that would explain what all this meant; no thought emerged. He was lost on a sea of sterile whiteness and hissing light. He had no idea where he was, and, with sudden frightful panic, he realised he had no idea who he was.

The masked face pulled back and he saw a man in a lab coat, brandishing a syringe. The man pulled the mask down and smiled at him.

"That's right, Detective Ellison. Don't try to fight it. Let yourself drift away. There is nothing you can do to stop this process."

Detective Ellison. Detective Jim Ellison.

The man reached over to another bench and picked up an implement. He flicked a switch and a high-pitched whine started up – a drill; some sort of surgical drill. After a moment of inspecting its operation, the man switched it off, replaced it on the bench and picked up some other things. Only as he bent over the bed again could Jim see what they were – a marker pen and a safety razor.

The man leant over Jim familiarly and began to stroke the razor across Jim's scalp – the right side - in long, slow movements. Jim could hear the rasp of the blade as it swept over the curve of his skull, from his temple to behind his ear. After a while he heard the razor being placed back on the bench. Now there was another smell – the arid scent of marker ink. The man's arm hovered over his face and he heard the marker squeak its way across his shaven patch of skull, and felt its tickling path.

With each passing moment, memory flooded back, and with it came grief, and fear, and the panic of utter helplessness. But with the grief was a voice, echoing through the empty halls of his useless body.

"It's all about breathing and concentration. One step at a time. Zone out the light. Concentrate. Yeah. Yeah, that's it. Zone out the light. There's only music..."

Blair. Blair's teaching, his intuition about the way for Jim to best use his senses, controlling them, making them work for Jim, and not control *him*; it was Blair's legacy to him. He let that thought spiral away and followed it, far from the tickle of the marker pen and the glint of the scalpel on the bench nearby. He followed it down more shadowy passageways to recall how one sense could help, or hinder, another. He could hear Blair's voice, telling him what to think.

"... so your senses are using neurological pathways. You still have at least four of the five operational – you've just tested all that. Now, if you can track back along those pathways, using – I dunno – maybe touch, 'cos that's the sense most closely allied with movement, I guess... see if you can search for the areas in your brain suppressed by the drug. When you've got to the main offenders, you could piggyback on the other senses to build up some strength, and then you could maybe use them to push the drug out, stop it working....."

The man suddenly reached over and slapped Jim's face. The sting reverberated through Jim's head, but there was no instinctive outward reaction. And that seemed to Jim to be the most appalling thing so far; it brought home immediately the cold reality that he would feel the scalpel's path through his scalp and the drill's passage through his bone, and West's hands on his brain. And he would have to suffer it all with no way of fighting back.

"Excellent!" beamed the man. He held up the syringe Jim had first seen. "The neuro- agent, you see? Wonderful stuff, and I've used just the right amount, it would seem. Practice makes perfect!"

He gestured towards something out of Jim's line of sight.

"The monitor here tells me you had exactly the right reaction in terms of brain waves to that little bit of physical stimulus, so you will be in a perfect, receptive state when we start the operation. Sensate, but effectively paralysed. I'm keeping a little in reserve, though. Just in case we need to calm you further during the process. Too much at once is far too dangerous. I could lose you before we've even *begun* to discover how you'll function under the device. That would be a *tragedy*."

The man straightened up again, and with swift, precise movements unbuckled the straps that held Jim to the bed.

"There you are, nice and relaxed. No need for these now and it's easier without restraints to manipulate the subject and test how they respond to commands. No point in my saying "liff your right arm" if it's tied down, now, is there?" He chuckled happily. "Well, I think we're nearly ready. I'll call Louise in a short while. I need her steady hand with some of this. I do hope she's finished the apple pies."

He walked away, and Jim took up where he had left off, listening to that kind, generous, frequently tetchy, but always inspired voice:

"It's all about breathing and concentration. One step at a time...."

Blair stood in the trees and observed the house. Even more than the previous night, he sensed something lurking on the mountainside, and now he felt he knew its purpose. It had been in his mind since the cliff, as the terrible images of broken, twisted people seared into his memory; it had dogged his steps on the long walk across the mountainside. The black skies and dripping trees no longer felt like mere weather. Something primal was closing in on the Wests' fortress. Something as old as man's presence in these forests was drawing nearer, aiming to wreak vengeance on the violence and cruelty perpetrated there.

And now it was as if he were at one with that presence, as if it walked with him and filled his heart with boundless anger and hatred. It was up to him to stop this cycle of death. He felt that heavy obligation, even if he no longer felt his various injuries. He was vaguely conscious that his arm and his head were still bleeding slightly, the redness smearing under his shirt as he moved. But his head no longer seemed to throb as it had done, and his lungs no longer seemed to burn.

His last trek towards the house had felt extraordinarily easy, compared to the hours that had preceded it. It was almost as if he has been floating over the ground. Roots had no longer tripped him up, branches had failed to snag him and drag him backwards. The dark mist had swirled around him and he relished its clammy embrace as providing his concealment. His vision had been blurring a little, but that was the mist too, of course it was. All he had focused on was the need to keep moving, the need to get back to the house and find out what had happened to Jim.

His anxiety about Jim had settled into a kind of premature grief, which itself needed revenge. The dread that something terrible had happened had been hanging over him since the cliff

– no, since waking this morning – but he refused point blank to think about the consequences of Jim's loss. How could he contemplate the end of that friendship, the end of Jim? Unthinkable! Still, more than half of him knew he was kidding himself with the hope of finding Jim neither dead nor irreparably damaged; and that same half, if he dared listened to it, told him he was equally deluded if he thought that the destruction of Jim Ellison wouldn't destroy most of Blair Sandburg as well.

Thunder was rumbling in the distance and the rain had increased, but Blair had ceased to register his degree of saturation and cold. The dark brooding clouds pressing down on the forests were merely a canvas for the horror everywhere, and the increasing wind roaring through the pines was merely background noise. His mind was fully concentrated on the house.

There was no welcoming blaze of light like that which had greeted them on their weary trudge up the track yesterday. In fact there was barely a light showing; was this why they hadn't noticed the building on the hillside, until they had triggered the stinger? Had the house sprung into life the moment another item of prey had appeared on its horizon? He could easily visualise the Wests suddenly turning the place from dark mass to lighted haven, pulling the two of them in.

His earlier conversation with Simon played back through his memory.

"You're *what*?"

"Those disappearances. The wilderness disappearances you've been handed by the county police down here. I'm pretty sure we're slap bang in the middle of it. They're called West, though they say Weston. He was a big-shot psychologist back east who got caught out in funny practice, and that practice has got weirder than you could ever believe, Simon. They're in a big house up on the ridge, off on an old logging track way above the county road."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because we're *there*, Simon! Please shut up and listen! There isn't much power in this phone. They have electronic surveillance everywhere. Get the local boys quick, but get them to come up silent, no radio traffic. And be armed. This is nasty, Simon. I've seen the bodies. It's medical experimentation and murder, and now Jim's with them and I don't know if he's... I don't know if he's alive or dead right now."

He had almost choked on the words.

"Which county road, Sandburg?"

"The one going south to Indian Heaven from Morton. The storm's been bad. The road conditions are really awful here. We turned off by mistake onto the logging road about 20 miles past Emerson, and ended up driving on that for about 20 minutes, then the truck got disabled. I can't explain right now, it would take too long. Jim's in real trouble. These people are the ones behind the disappearances and I've got to try to get him out before it's too late."

"No, Sandburg, wait for the county boys. I'll get on to them right away. The problem is there have been some wash-outs in that area. I saw it on the news last night. But there must be men at Morton who can get to you..."

"There's no time, Simon! I'm going in. I've got Jim's spare gun."

"Jesus, Blair! Stay where you are!"

"Are you crazy? They're going to destroy him!"

But he was suddenly talking to empty air; the little cell phone's battery had finally given up. He had stared at it in despair, then had shoved it into his pocket and trudged forward. Now he stood not a hundred yards away from the place.

There was no way of knowing whether he'd been observed; likewise there was no time to worry about that. Even so, he skirted the edge of the building carefully, aiming for the rear of the house and the chance of getting in through the kitchen area. No lights snapped on, no voices called out. He held the gun up tightly by his shoulder and slipped into the utility room. It was dark, but a light gleamed through from the kitchen beyond. He edged up to the door, and peered through the gap in the frame.

Louise was at the kitchen table, her back to him, chopping apples on a wooden board with a long, gleaming kitchen knife. He could shoot her now, he thought. He should do, and rid the world of that bit of evil at least. He steadied the gun, the need to kill burning through his veins, but still forced himself to pause and consider, and his common sense prevailed. He didn't want to alert Burt West, wherever he was, especially if that would place Jim in even further risk.

The way a cop would do it - the way Jim would do it - would be to surprise her, hold her at gunpoint and force Burt West to let his friend go. Then they could wait for the county boys. But surprising her was the first test. And he failed abjectly, for she turned sharply with the knife raised and a broad smile on her face.

"Well, I see you are bloody but unbowed! What an extraordinary feat! You must have rubber bones, Dr Sandburg. Do at least tell me that Julie smashed to bits?"

Blair moved out into the kitchen, his gun levelled at her, though she showed no concern.

"Oh, yeah," he replied flatly. "She smashed all right. Now take me to Jim."

"What makes you think he's here, darling? Guests soon outstay their welcome, you know."

"Because he wasn't at the cliff. Because you want him as a test subject for whatever perverted obscenity of an experiment you've got going on here. Julie was part of it, wasn't she? Some mind control surgery that made her act like an automaton. No freedom, no thoughts, just orders from you. A good little slave for you."

"Oh yes, darling, she was lovely in all respects, let me assure you. Both Burt and I enjoyed her company in so many ways, and it's always so gratifying when someone wants to do anything they can to please you."

Blair moved another pace forward.

"Shut the fuck up, Louise, and take me to Jim."

"*'Take me to your leader'?* How funny! He *is* rather important to you, isn't he? I guess you hope that goes both ways? You must have been somewhat disconcerted by his behaviour last night – oh, we heard and saw your little tiff in the bedroom. How amusing that was! We thought we could have some more fun with you before we split you up, so we put a tiny bit of a cannabinoid drug in your coffee, you see. It's a nice little variety – it has a subtle effect on the psyche and induces neurosis and paranoia. Don't worry, it will have worn off by now."

Blair gestured with the handgun.

"I said, stop talking! Start walking!"

But Louise kept speaking, staring intently at him whilst absently tracing patterns on the table-top with the blade of the knife.

"I'm sure Jim would apologise for what he said. If he could, that is. As of today, dear Jim won't even acknowledge your presence. He won't know who you are, he won't even know who *he* is, or what he feels or thinks. He'll only know what we tell him."

Blair felt his knees go weak, and he grasped at the counter to steady himself, fighting to keep the gun trained on Louise.

"Drop that fucking knife, you bitch, and tell me where you've got him! Because if you don't, I might as well shoot you right now, and save myself any more trouble. And then I'm going to find your crazy husband and do the same to him."

He saw her eyes flick to a panel on the wall; an intercom.

"Call him!" he snapped. "Call him up here."

She merely smiled at him, fierce and unwavering, her teeth gleaming sharp and predatory in the bright lights of the kitchen.

"He's a genius, you know. He never deserved the vilification that came his way. It was all blown out of proportion. Just petty minds and little intellects smacking down on something they could never in a million years understand. They wanted to destroy the work, and destroy him!"

She slammed the hilt of the knife down on the wooden table. Despite his resolve, Blair flinched. Louise didn't notice.

"Well, we've won!" she crowed. "We're going to show them exactly how great Dr Burt West is, and the world will give him his due at last! Our time here has given us the chance to move into discoveries beyond even our own expectations. We're on the brink of a new science that will change the world as we know it, and for the better. So no little runt with a sociology diploma is going to get in the way of that, believe me, young Blair!"

He saw her raise the knife, but before he could fire, the intercom crackled into life.

"*My sweet, could you...*"

Her eyes automatically flicked back to the intercom. Blair couldn't help himself; he swivelled and fired at the panel on the wall. The bullet shattered the device and bits of the plastic casing flew out into the room. But his momentary loss of focus cost him dearly. Louise leapt onto a chair and then threw herself over the table at him, the long knife outstretched. He dodged the blade, but the impact of her body threw him backwards onto the floor and the gun flew from his hand, skidding across the slate tiles.

Louise was screaming obscenities, her long blonde hair loose and smothering him, the nails of one hand raking at his face while he grappled with the other hand that held the knife. She was strong – God Almighty, she was strong; powerful in her rage and insanity. He twisted his head away from her sharp fingernails but though they missed his eyes they caught his cheek. He shouted out with the pain and pressed upwards with all his might against the arm that threatened to bring the knife down into his neck.

He was already pretty much at the end of his resources; blood loss and head trauma were working against him, not that he registered that fact. His only thought was to win, to kill her, to survive. He couldn't die here, not before he'd completed his mission. He would *not* go under!

One last surge of energy, and he brought his knee up into her stomach. The blow was enough to stall her as she gasped for breath, and in that split second he knocked the knife from her weakened grasp and, suddenly, he had the upper hand. His spirits renewed, he threw her off him and, as she sprawled backwards on the floor, turned her over in one powerful movement, twisting her arm behind her back as he had seen Jim do so often to immobilise a perpetrator. She was still screaming and kicking, and it gave him huge pleasure to strike her again, smashing her head down onto the slate floor. She stopped screaming and lay still.

Panting hoarsely, he sat back on his heels for a moment, trying to regroup. He saw the gun a few feet away and reached out for it. It was good to feel it in his hand again. He dragged himself off the floor with the help of the table and looked around him. He had to move fast. Burt would be seconds away, surely? He must have heard the gun shot even if he hadn't heard the desperate struggle that ensued. And wherever Burt was right now, there surely would be Jim.

He bent cautiously over Louise's prone form – still breathing. He aimed a vicious kick at her leg and there was no reaction, so it seemed she was out cold. With the gun in one hand, ready to shoot if she showed any sign of resistance, he grabbed a handful of her shirt with the other and started dragging her across the tiles of the kitchen, over the threshold of the doorway and into the lounge. He looked around for inspiration; there seemed to be nothing to tie her with or tie her to.... then he remembered the hallway and the tall cupboard by the coat rack. Breathless with the exertion, he kept dragging her across the polished wood and out into the darkened hallway.

The cupboard was both wide and deep and, with a well-placed blow from the flat of his hand on a recessed panel in the frame, its door swung open – a coat cupboard, full of waterproofs and heavy wool jackets. He dropped the woman and, with his free hand, pulled the garments off their rail and hurled them onto the hall floor. Then, stuffing the gun into his waistband, he hauled her up, his hands under her arms, and dumped her into the cupboard bottom, where she lay crumpled, her head against her chest, amongst the discarded boots

and hiking shoes. The kitchen floor had probably smashed her nose, as blood was running down her face.

"For the record, lady," he muttered, "I'm a little runt with an anthropology doctorate."

He slammed the cupboard door shut again, and then pulled out the gun, grabbed it by the barrel and smashed the butt against the recessed control panel. The wooden cover shattered, revealing the components inside. Another blow, and the metal and plastic showered in pieces onto the floor. He pressed the frame again and this time door didn't budge. Hoping that he had thus contained half of the Wests, he started back towards the kitchen.

He had just reached the doorway when he saw the far wall of the kitchen sliding back, and Burt West emerging, looking anxious and carrying a hunting rifle. His look turned to horror as he saw the evidence of the fight, and he was opening his mouth to call out, presumably for his wife, when he caught sight of Blair.

West yelped, but rather than use the rifle he darted back behind the wall-panel door. Blair was already halfway across the room, but not quickly enough; he slammed into the wall-panel as it slid shut behind West. In frustration, Blair hammered ineffectually at what now appeared simply bare wall – a perfect way to disguise the access to West's workshop, chop shop, laboratory, whatever it was. Then, with a little more thought, he started hitting parts of the wall more systematically, in the wild hope that he would find the control device that would open the door, the way all the other doors in the house seemed to operate.

No luck; West must have locked it from the other side. Blair was looking around him in despair, his free hand tearing at his hair, when he saw a light switch, fixed to the side of a cupboard next to where the wall panel had slid closed. But there were no other light switches in this house; it was all centrally-controlled, voice-activated....

Burt West had been hiding the control in plain sight. Blair flicked the switch and the wall slid open to reveal a dimly-lit passageway that looked like it had been hewn from the rock of the cliff behind the house. Bracing the gun firmly with both hands, he moved swiftly down the passage to where the light seemed strongest. Apart from the hiss of the lighting and his own laboured breathing it was silent. He had to restrain himself from breaking into a run; he couldn't afford to be ambushed by an armed Burt West, not just for his own sake but for Jim's safety, too.

The passage ended in a doorway, the door wide open. Hugged the rock walls, Blair moved quietly to the brightly-lit opening and craned his head to look round the door frame. What he saw brought an involuntary cry to his throat. He moved fully into the room, feet braced, gun in the firing position, unable to stay back any longer.

A man lay on a long table, something like an operating table. He was naked. He had clearly been held down with straps and where the leather had chafed with his struggles was visible in marks on his skin. Those straps now hung loosely from the sides of the table and the man's limbs were similarly slack, his face blank. Electrodes were attached to his head and chest and part of his scalp had been shaved, a pattern of curves and crosses drawn on the shaved area.

The man was Jim Ellison. Rather, it was Jim Ellison's body, all right, but there was nothing there that gave a hint of Jim Ellison the man. He was alive, but in what condition? Had his mind already been destroyed?

West, his face now almost green with shock, had abandoned the rifle on a second, empty table, and had gathered Jim up with one arm under Jim's shoulders, holding him close, so that his head was crushed against West's chest. Jim's neck was at a sharp angle, and his arms and legs lay limply in different sprawled attitudes, with no sign of motor function. Jim's eyes, unblinking, red and watering from the prolonged exposure to the light, were directed at Blair, but there was no recognition in them. And West held a syringe to his neck.

"You can stop right there, Dr Sandburg! You come any closer, and I'm going to put this needle right into his carotid. It will cause instant cardiac arrest. He will not recover, you understand? One more step and I will kill him with this syringe. So put down the gun!"

PART 7

...Last thing I remember, I was Running for the door...

Jim had been drifting on his senses since he had woken to his paralysed state. Concentrating on touch, he had forced that sense to grow in strength, visualising it overpowering the effects of the drug, until he felt he was capable of instructing at least one muscle to move at his command. But the movement itself still eluded him. As West had pattered over his workbench, laying out shining surgical instruments, he had tried to formulate other options, until the most obvious presented itself to him – sight. If he focussed on the part of his body he wanted to move, maybe that sense would piggyback on his sense of touch, and the combined power would allow him motion.

With West's back turned, he had concentrated his sight onto the index finger of his right hand. It took some moments, but just at the moment he felt it was a lost cause, his finger twitched. He felt elation flood through him, elation and hope. His eyes started to hurt and he blinked, then realised he *could* blink and move his eyes, and that his eyes in their dryness were protesting at the action. He blinked some more, and stared again at his hand – now he could flex all four fingers.

He continued the process, working down his legs and up the arm he could most clearly see. He felt sure he could sense neurons firing and messages being sent in their thousands - nay, millions - to his nerve endings, his muscles and his tendons. Just some more time; some more time, *please*, and maybe he could move enough to get the drop on West. Though what he could do after that, he was less sure.

The commotion heard faintly from elsewhere in the house had clearly startled West. Without a second look at Jim, he had moved swiftly to a tall cupboard near the door, extracted a hunting rifle and disappeared up the passageway. Jim could see stretching away, he assumed back to the house. West's absence was a golden opportunity. Now Jim strained with all his might to force life and volition back into his body. With supreme will, and drawing on all his physical strength, he forced an arm, and then a leg, to sluggishly cross the bed a short way. Not enough for a quick getaway, but the strength in his limbs was growing all the time, he could feel it.

West's sudden return was a blow, but immediately Jim sensed that things had changed; West looked scared and jumpy. He relaxed his straining muscles and did his very best to look as he would have done when fully paralysed, waiting for his chance. But West's next act surprised him. Before Jim could force his body to move, the man threw the rifle onto a nearby workbench, grabbed the neuro-agent syringe he had shown Jim earlier, and grasped him round the shoulders, hauling him bodily up on the table so that he was leaning into West. He could feel the prick of the needle against his throat.

In a moment he realised the cause of West's anxiety. He could sense a familiar presence outside the laboratory, a presence he never thought he would feel again: Blair! Disbelief and joy ran through him in equal parts. He stared at the doorway, torn between wanting proof his

friend was truly still alive and hoping that Blair would be cautious in taking on West. That last hope died swiftly as Blair appeared in the doorway, gun raised.

"You can stop right there, Dr Sandburg! You come any closer, and I'm going to put this needle right into his carotid. It will cause instant cardiac arrest. He will not recover, you understand? One more step and I will kill him with this syringe. So put down the gun!"

Jim stared at Blair, involuntary tears of pain from his irritated eyes flowing down his cheeks. He tried to convey what he still couldn't speak, but it seemed his facial muscles were slower to respond to his hard-won control than his limbs. Frozen in horror, Blair stared back, his face grim, his eyes burning, clearly believing Jim's mind was already lost.

Jim could guess the various options running through his friend's head. Fire right now and risk the needle penetrating Jim's skin, even if he managed to kill West in the process? Fire at something else, like the burner or the many chemicals surrounding the walls, and hope for a diversion? Put down the gun and try another tack....?

Kill him, Chief! Kill the bastard now!

"Jim, can you hear me? Can you speak?"

"He can hear you, Dr Sandburg, but he can't respond. His motor function has been suppressed. Shortly, he will move only at my command."

Blair gave West an icy look, then flicked his gaze back to Jim. *Now!* thought Jim. *Now he needs a sign! Any sign!*

So he winked.

Blair's nostrils flared, an emotional reaction at seeing some cognition still within his friend, but he was quick to disguise the response as sheer horror at the situation.

"I'm still waiting, Dr Sandburg."

Blair bit his lip, then gave Jim a desolate look.

"Sorry, Jim, I can't risk it..."

With his free hand raised in a placatory gesture, Blair flicked the safety on the gun and placed it carefully on a workbench, using the movement to bring him further into the room.

"That's right, but don't come any further, Dr Sandburg. Just push the gun over to me."

Blair leant forward and gave the gun a shove. It skidded along the workbench to where the burner was still hissing away within its ventilation chamber. West gave him a sickly smile.

"I have no idea how you come to be here, Dr Sandburg, and I am deeply concerned for my wife's well-being. What have you done with her, may I ask?"

Blair switched his gaze from Jim's face to West's.

"She's not dead, more's the pity. But she won't be bothering us for a bit. So, Burt, why don't you put that needle down and let me take Jim away from here. Then you and she can clear out before the cops get here. Because they *are* coming, the call's already been made."

West breathed in sharply. Jim could sense the tension in the man, and guessed he was weighing up his own options.

"I don't care where you go, Burt," continued Blair in the same neutral tone, lying through his teeth. "Take that Landcruiser out there. I just want to take Jim away. Can he still walk? You haven't processed him yet, have you?"

Jim could see Blair's hands shaking with his emotion and the effort of keeping calm in the face of such risk.

"He'll recover," said West, after a few moments. "But it would be a severe disappointment to me not to be able to use Detective Ellison after all. So I don't think I can accede to your wishes."

He let Jim's head drop abruptly on the table, and Jim let himself slide limply away, pushing his arms free as he did so. Neither of the other two seemed to notice this movement, intent as they were on each other.

"So what're you gonna do, Burt? Like I said, your options are pretty limited. I'm offering you a way out here..."

Burt reached out and grabbed the gun, turning it on Blair.

"This option is my best, I think, Dr Sandburg."

Though Blair's hands went up in an automatic response and his body started to twist away from the gun, Burt was already pulling the trigger. But Jim was ready. He poured all he had into the nervous system of his lower body, and his legs kicked out - not coordinated, not precise, not skilful, but hard enough and wild enough to knock West over. He went flying, his hands sweeping over the workbench behind him and knocking the ventilation cover off the burner flame. The gun went off, the bullets shattering glass bottles of fluids on one of the shelves, and the liquids cascaded down onto the workbench.

"Way to go, Jim!" shouted Blair in delight, but Jim, trying to recover his balance on the bed, saw with horror movement directly behind his friend. He tried to shout a warning, but all that came out was a guttural cry.

Blair turned, too late. Louise was in the doorway, her hair wild around her bloody face, a kitchen knife in her hand. Before Blair had a chance to duck aside, she leapt forward and plunged the knife deep in his side. Blair cried out, grabbing at the hilt, and fell to his knees.

"You couldn't keep me locked up, you cretin!" she shouted at him, kicking him so he fell head first onto the floor. "This is *my* house! It *knows* me!"

Jim howled in despair. He flailed his arms, gaining purchase on the bed. West was already back on his feet and reaching out for him but Jim twisted, still ungainly in his new-found ability to move, and slapped a clumsy hand down on the workbench to cover the syringe.

He raised it in his fist like a dagger and, as West caught hold of his shoulders to restrain him, he flung out his arm; the needle plunged into West's neck.

Both West and Louise screamed. West at once let Jim go, his hands scrabbling at the syringe to pull it out, but then almost immediately grabbed instead at his chest. His eyes popping and his face turning blue, he slumped to the floor, gasping raggedly for breath.

Louise leapt to his side and dropped to her knees, pulling at her husband's shoulders and trying to turn him over.

"Darling! Darling! No! Don't die! Don't die!"

Jim tore his gaze away and back to the motionless figure by the door. *Oh, sweet Christ, not Blair, not after all this.* He put out his hands to push himself off the bed and flinched back, his skin scorched. Flames were licking along the workbench where the split chemicals had ignited in the heat being produced by the now unprotected burner.

He half fell, half dragged himself off the bed and dropped to the floor, the electrodes pulling off his skin as he moved. Hand over hand, he hauled himself to where Blair lay. The tears of pain that had been running down his cheeks in the moments before had already turned to tears of grief. He touched his friend, rolling him over awkwardly, expecting the worst.

"Jesus, Jim! Are you moving? Can you walk?"

Jim's answered was slurred, but almost a word.

"Chff!"

"S'okay!" gasped Blair, anticipating Jim's question. "The knife didn't go right in. The bandages... my bandages... it got stuck in them!" He laughed, a little hysterically. "There's a good side to breaking ribs, see?"

To Jim's horror, he found the hilt of the knife and pulled the weapon out of his wound with a sharp cry.

"Better out than in, man," he said reassuringly, though the whiteness of his face belied his bravado.

"Bludd" said Jim, indistinctly, touching the red patch on Blair's shirt.

"Yeah, I'm bleeding." Blair was already on his knees and dragging Jim up off the floor, hands under his armpits. "Don't worry, there's been worse today. Come on! We gotta get out of here!"

He stood, pulling Jim upright at the same time. Jim tried hard to get his balance but he could tell that Blair was bearing most of his weight as he was dragged along, out of the laboratory. Looking back over his shoulder, Jim saw Louise rise again from the floor, her face an ugly mask of hate.

"He's dead! You killed the finest mind the world has ever seen! You killed him, and you're going to pay for that!"

Jim saw her reach through the flames to retrieve the hunting rifle. He tried to warn Blair, but "Get goin', Chief!" came out as "Gnnnh...!" Blair had already got the message, though, and they covered the distance up the passageway with unexpected speed, Blair clearly using all his strength to pull Jim along with him. The door to the kitchen slid open and Blair pushed Jim through, throwing himself to one side as a bullet whizzed past them. He slammed his hand against a switch on the nearest cupboard and the door slid shut; another bullet could be heard thudding into the far side.

Blair grabbed Louise's chopping board from the table and smashed it against the switch.

"No idea," he explained, somewhat confusingly, grabbing hold of Jim again and hauling him up, "but it's worth a try."

Out, out, along the wood floor of the lounge, through the dark hallway and the splinters of a smashed cupboard, tripping over unexpected piles of clothing. Jim was suddenly conscious of a roaring and crashing from outside, and as Blair hit the door panel and the outer door slid open, he realised why.

A thunderstorm raged directly overhead, with lightning sizzling around the nearby peaks and thunder rumbling almost continuously. The rain was torrential, and as they moved outside, Jim felt the air get colder and colder, till the rain turned to sleet and then, in amongst all the lightning, snow started to drive through the trees. It was as if a winter apocalypse had come calling.

Blair now fell in the mud, and Jim fell with him. Jim found his feet more quickly this time, and he felt his legs respond with much more confidence, but Blair wasn't moving. Jim turned him over; Blair's eyes were half-closed and he was deathly pale in the garish light of the storm.

"Nuh!" shouted Jim, the only word he could manage. Blair's eyes flickered wider.

"Sorry, man," he breathed, and used Jim's arms, already supporting him in the mud, to help himself upright again, getting first to his knees and slowly to his feet. "Can't quite keep my head on, you know what I mean? Everything's gone a bit woozy."

He started to fall again but Jim caught him, and now it was Jim who carried the two of them towards the remaining Landcruiser and the possibility of some shelter. They had just about reached it when Louise came screaming through the outer door. Her clothes were scorched and little flames flickered at the edge of her skirt, but she didn't seem to notice. Behind her, the door slid open and shut repeatedly in its own private frenzy.

Louise still had the hunting rifle, and now fired it wildly around her, hitting the ground near them and shattering the windows of the 'Cruiser. Jim got them into the lee of the vehicle but Blair had fainted again, and this time Jim couldn't get a response, not even with clumsy slaps to his face. There was no way either of them could move any further.

He gazed helplessly at his friend, pale and still on the ground, and then turned back to Louise. They themselves had no weapons now, and he had no way of knowing how much ammunition she had. If she kept firing like this, it was only a matter of time before he and Blair were shot and killed. He braced himself to take her on should she come closer, but even

though his control over his limbs was improving, he had no real confidence in his abilities just then.

Something exploded in the house and the windows in the ground floor flashed with flame. Louise turned to face the inferno, then swung back again to face them.

“You've destroyed his work! You've destroyed everything!”

More bullets hit the mud beside to them. Jim rose up onto his knees to gauge her distance from them. The snow was getting thicker and the wind more intense, bending the trees, their branches seeming to spiral with its force. The air was bone-shatteringly cold and the lightning seemed to be getting closer and closer.

Then he saw it; a shape striding through the trees towards them. It wasn't a man, though it appeared to have arms and legs. Its outline was vague and imprecise, but its blackness was blacker than even the darkness of the forest or of the storm; it was like the blackness of death. It was monstrously tall, on its head were the shapes of horns, and its eyes glowed red; the earth shook with its footsteps.

Jim was frozen in terror, a strange primal terror that he could not recall before, despite many, many times of being afraid. The fear seemed to penetrate every atom of him and render him completely immobile. All he could do was stare as the thing drew nearer. He saw it tower over the two of them and could do nothing but hope he was shielding Blair from whatever destruction would come next, for he had no doubt that the thing was intent on destruction.

Lightning hit the house and the air sparked with the charge. Louise suddenly looked up and screamed at what she saw. She began to back away, firing into the vague shape, but the shape stepped right over the Landcruiser and bent towards her, its long sinewy arms sweeping through the air until they caught her. She was trapped in its bony fingers and was lifted, screaming, right up to the thing's indistinct face and its piercing red eyes.

Blinding white lighting struck the ground right next to where the thing stood and the thunder crashed, shaking the Landcruiser. In the flash of light, Jim saw the black shape's hands move abruptly apart and Louise stopped screaming. The rifle fell and landed with a thud on the dirt near them. Then what was left of Louise went flying through the air to fall at the threshold of the house, where the door continued to chop at her remains as it slid open and closed, open and closed, open and closed....

Jim looked up at the black shape and the implacable red eyes, and waited for the hands to reach for them too. But the shape – creature - whatever it was - simply straightened up and strode off into the forest again, the snow swirling around it and obscuring it from view. Moments later there was a huge roar from deep within the mountain and the upper floor of the house exploded, with flames bursting out from the roof and the huge glass windows shattering and falling in a hail of shards into the trees below. The 'Cruiser shifted with the impact but it stayed firm, protecting them from the worst of the blast.



The noise finally roused Blair, who looked confusedly up at Jim.

"Wha...?"

"Eshploded," ground out Jim. "Dishel tans in cliff."

Blair still looked bemused so Jim elaborated.

"Boom," he said, waving his arms a bit.

"Oh, the *diesel*..."

Blair tried a little smile which didn't last long.

"They gone?"

"Aw gaun, Chff. Dud."

"Good riddance," replied Blair closing his eyes and reaching for Jim's hand. Jim held on like a drowning man. "Their lab, all that evil. Blown up, yeah? No one could reinvent it, maybe?"

Jim squeezed the limp hand in his even harder.

"Nuh." he managed. "Nuh mawr."

Blair's eyes flicked open again.

"That mad bitch. What happened to her? I thought she was gonna shoot us, for sure...."

"*Gaun, aw gaun...*"

Jim looked back at the house. There was no sign now of Louise amongst the fallen masonry, though no doubt her remains were there. They might be consumed in the fire but there would still be traces. The forensic people would surely put her injuries and death down to a lightning strike, and even the action of the sliding door, at a pinch. Yeah, he could always add that bit for a little more elaboration – anything but what he actually saw.

He turned back to Blair again, and saw his friend smiling weakly at him. Blair raised his other hand and patted Jim's cheek.

"You stuck that way, caveman Jim?"

He tried to smile back; his face seemed to twitch into shape again.

"*Dohn thnk....*"

"Hope not. It'll make interrogating suspects a bit longwinded. But hey, it'll bring you down to the level of most of our clients, at least."

"*Gat be'er...*" began Jim, then gave up. Blair grinned sleepily at him.

"Hey, don't ever go on a solo mission without me again, y'hear?"

Jim opened his mouth to reply, but his friend had already slipped back into unconsciousness. Jim pressed his hand to the damp and bloody side, hoping to stem any further blood loss – *Jesus, where had all these bandages come from?* – and pulled Blair close to his chest, wrapping his arms around the other man in the hope of keeping both of them warm.

He realised with a start that he himself was naked, sprawled in the snow- covered mud and dangerously cold to his very bones, not even shivering now. But no matter; he could hear vehicles approaching, doubtless drawn by the blaze and the explosion. Not much longer - help was at hand, and embarrassment was better than death from exposure. He pressed his chin down on Blair's head.

Tell you later, Chief. I promise, he thought. Tell you all about it. I reckon you'll appreciate how things turned out, though no one else would believe me, that's for sure...

The snow had already slipped back into rain, and the lights of the county police cars blinked wetly like red eyes in the blackness of the forest as they slithered up the track towards the ruined house.

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