

WELCOME
to NIGHTMARE
LAKE



by
Unbelievable2

Welcome to Nightmare Lake

Art by Stargatesg1971

Story by unbelievable2

Blair Sandburg stared stonily out through the windshield. The water was bright blue, reflecting the glorious midsummer day, and the trees on the lakeshore were a solid green backdrop to the gaudy foreground. Where they had drawn up was a riot of bunting, brightly painted boats, wooden stalls, and officials' cabins, with a mass of humanity strutting around, squeezed into logo-strewn wet-suits or parading tight jeans and short skirts.

"A sports convention, you said. A wilderness location, you said. Not a fairground!"

"Come on, Chief!" Jim Ellison nudged him in the ribs. "No sports event is going to be low profile. Here we are in a gorgeous mountain landscape, a beautiful lake to play with, and plenty of pretty girls to distract you. What's not to like?"

"You misled me..."

"Oh, stop whining! You'll have a great time. All you have to do is watch from the bank while I take part in the contest, keep an eye out for the bad guys, help me make the arrests, and get the beers in. Easy!"

Blair sniffed in disdain.

"And remind me what these so-called *sports* are?"

"Water-skiing, motor-cycling and skeet-shooting. You knew that already."

That earned Jim a sideways look.

"I was asking again for dramatic effect, Jim. I thought there were at least going to be some ball games in the mix. You were economical with the truth, my friend. Man, what a bore fest!"

Jim sighed.

"You really are entering into the spirit here, aren't you? Can I remind you, you wanted to come! And anyway, you know this is a means to an end. We're some extra ears and eyes".

"Yadda, yadda," muttered Blair, grudgingly acknowledging that there was, in fact, a legitimate purpose for their visit. The festival, with its Modern Iron Man contest, had become a focus for illegal narcotics distribution, and the local cops had requested undercover back-up for their operation to find the kingpins. However he also knew Jim had an ulterior motive for volunteering the both of them.

"Well, maybe they did get a package with *your* eyes and ears, man, but the real truth here is that *you* want to be a Modern Iron Man. Come on, admit it!"

“We’re helping out our colleagues, Sandburg...”

“Admit it!”

Jim grinned, and had the good grace to look at little sheepish.

“Well, I thought it would be kinda fun. I haven't water-skied for so long, and Coachman Lake is a great location. Second only to Lake Chelan for this kind of stuff. You'll enjoy it! You can get a little skiing in too.”

Blair shot him a black look.

“What’s wrong? You can water-ski, right? I thought you said...”

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Blair testily. “Naomi's cousin Frank taught me years ago. But that was in Southern California, man! It looks so cold here!”

Jim leaned over and ruffled his friend’s hair.

“You just need to get into some rubber, Chief.”

Blair jumped slightly, and Jim cleared his throat hastily.

“A wet suit, I meant! You know...”

Blair harrumphed.

“Come on, let's get this done.”

The bar was crowded and noisy, but no more so than the rest of those on the strip along the lakeshore, and it had the advantage of being connected to the small hotel where the two of them were sharing a room. Blair paid for the beers and wove his way back to the small table they had managed to nab at the rear of the room. As the people in front of him parted, he saw that Jim had company - a young man with close-cropped blond hair and an impressive physique was now sharing their table, and he and Jim were already in deep conversation. Jim looked up with an absent smile as Blair drew close.

“Chief, this is Casper Carpenter.”

They shook hands. Casper’s grip was just on the acceptable side of painfully tight.

“Hi, Blair.” The man turned back to Jim again. “Yeah, I think it’s safe to talk here. No one can hear anything in this noise. I'm really pleased you guys could come and help me this weekend. We’re pretty short of personnel in this area and it's real hard to police this kind of festival.”

Blair shot Jim a sideways glance, but Jim shook his head slightly in reassurance.

“It's okay, Chief. Casper’s who he says he is. They faxed a photo over to the PD before we left. Sorry, I forgot to show it to you.”

Blair nodded noncommittally and gave Casper a hard smile, while wondering why Jim had kept the photo secret, and then wondering why he should even care.

“What do you mean help *me*?” he asked, all insincere smiles. “Aren't there more cops on this assignment?”

Casper's bronzed features took on a slightly guilty expression. He took a swig of his beer before he answered; enough time for Blair to raise an eyebrow in Jim's direction. Jim gave a minute shrug back, with twist of his mouth that meant 'you think I know'?

“Yeah, I'm sorry,” said Casper, putting down his bottle. “We've had some trouble with getting a team together this weekend. There's been a crazy outbreak of food-poisoning at our PD. It's taken out four of my colleagues and the chief couldn't spare anyone but me, in the end.”

“Lucky you weren't stricken, too, Casper,” smiled Blair, sipping at his bottle. “That kind of thing can go through a department like wildfire.”

“Oh, it was pizza. I don't eat pizza,” said Casper earnestly, replying to Blair's question, but turning to address Jim. “I eat macrobiotic nowadays. Find it helps me with my fitness levels. I guess you feel that too, Jim.”

Blair snorted into his beer and had to turn away to cough.

“So, Casper,” began Jim, clearly keen to change the subject. “How do you want to deploy Sandburg and me at this festival?”

“Well, wow, I mean, you're the senior cop here, Jim!”

Jim raised his bottle in a small toast.

“This is your territory, Casper. We'll work to your directions, but I'm happy to offer advice if you want.”

“Wow,” repeated Casper, looking pleased. “Well, maybe we could take a walk and I'll brief you properly. I've got some theories I'd like to explain.”

“Fine by me,” said Jim, draining the last of his beer and placing the bottle decisively on the table. “Ready, Chief?”

Blair's last swig at his beer caught in his throat as he heard Casper's next words.

“Oh, I thought maybe we should keep this to cops only....?”

Blair looked sharply at Jim, who raised one hand in a 'calm down' gesture.

“Casper,” said Jim mildly, “maybe you're not aware, but Blair is my partner in police work. We're a team.”

Casper's eyebrows rose high into his tanned, smooth forehead.

“Oh, I'm sorry, Jim. I was under the impression that Blair was some kind of academic.”

“Blair,” said Blair pointedly, “is a doctor of anthropology, attached on a long-term secondment to Cascade PD. And is also in this here room, sitting at this here table, and participating in this here conversation.”

“Chief...” began Jim warningly.

“Oh, I apologise, Doctor Sandburg...”

“ ‘Blair’ will do, Casper.”

“I’m sorry, I was told you were here just as a visiting academic, along for the ride.”

“Oh, really?” snapped Blair, warming to his offence. “And who told you that?”

“I meant,” continued Casper, clearly hoping to pour oil on the situation, “anthropologists don’t usually do police work, do they? I mean, they wouldn’t have the training.”

“Casper,” said Jim kindly, “you’re just digging yourself a deeper hole, here.”

“No, let’s sort this out,” said Blair crossly. He turned to face Casper. “Yes, it’s true I’ve not been through the full police academy, but I have all the qualifications I need to help Jim. And that’s been the case for just on six years now.” He gave another insincere smile. “I may not have the badge but, you see, instead of that I use my brain...” - he took a pause, just stretching it far enough before he finished his sentence to convey the insult – “... in different ways to the average cop.”

Casper opened his mouth to reply, but Jim stood up swiftly.

“Okay, Chief, I think Casper gets the message. Now let’s take that stroll.”

Blair rose as well, and took his place by Jim’s side as they pushed their way out of the bar.

“I just wanna say,” insisted Casper, talking round Jim, who had carefully positioned himself between the two men, “I have the utmost respect for academia. I’m doing a part-time research study myself, which I hope will lead to a doctorate. The PD are helping to fund me.”

Jim turned to him in genuine surprise.

“You are? What’s it about?”

“Oh, I’m going to call it ‘Behind The Thin Blue Line’.”

“It’s already been done,” snarled Blair, lifting an arm to remonstrate; he was restrained.

“Really?” began Casper, seemingly oblivious to the silent struggle going on beside him, when a pink lightning bolt hurled itself out of the crowd and latched on to his neck.

“Casper, honey! How are you? I’ve been looking for you!”

Casper detached himself, and the lightning bolt was revealed as a leggy blonde in a fluffy pink bomber jacket and tight jeans.

“My cousin, Candy, gentlemen,” he announced. “She works at the festival every year.”

Said blonde – very pretty – righted herself, sent Jim a dazzling smile and then immediately attached herself to Blair’s arm, staring adoringly into his face with wide, blue eyes.

“Oh, you’re Doctor Sandburg! Casper’s told me all about you! I’ve got so many questions to ask you about an-thro-pol-ogy!” The purr of her voice stuttered slightly over the carefully-pronounced syllables of that final word.

“Uh?” was all Blair could manage, giving Jim a wild look. Jim slapped him on the back.

“Looks like you’ve got company for the evening, Chief,” he grinned. “You have fun talking to Candy, and Casper and me’ll go for that stroll, do some planning.”

And Blair was left staring at his departing back as he stood on the grubby sawdust of the bar, shrugging ineffectually at the arm that attached Candy, limpet-like, to his side.

Some time – a long time - later, Candy departed, finally getting the message that Blair had had enough of her presence for the evening. The level of relief he felt surprised him; someone like Candy had been a staple of the Sandburg social calendar at one stage; a pretty girl, keen on fun and frolic. But the more she painstakingly tried to draw him into conversation, the more his boredom and frustration increased. Just where the hell was Jim? And where the hell did he get off, going strolling with Casper the Barbarian in the sweet moonlight, leaving Blair holding the fort with the pink Barbie? They were a team, goddammit!

He made a desultory search of the foreshore, but there was no sign of Jim, so he returned to the bar, which by now was somewhat quieter, and sat down at the counter, ordering a beer he didn’t really want.

“Looking thoughtful, young feller.”

He jumped slightly. A battered figure was sitting next to him; Blair had not heard him arrive. The man’s face was craggy and weather-beaten, and he wore ancient and threadbare denims, and a battered Stetson slung on a thong over his back.

“Yeah,” replied Blair, aiming to be polite but not really wanting a conversation.

“Thinking’s good for a man,” continued the stranger. “Thinking’s a quiet thing to do. Not like all the ruckus round here these days. Joe! Gimme a cawfee – hot ‘n’ strong!”

Blair sighed; this was going to be hard to avoid, he could tell.

“So,” he started, “you’re drinking coffee. Not a beer drinker, then?”

The stranger cleared his throat and visibly restrained himself from spitting on the floor.

“Drinkin’s no good for anyone, you mark my words, young feller.” The coffee arrived and the stranger took a sip, and went on.

“So, what’re you doing in these parts, Dr Sandburg?”

“You know me?” replied Blair, taken aback.

“Read that article of your’n – last Fall, it was - in Anthropology Today. The one about gang culture and religious symbolism. I thought a whole lot about that one.”

“You read Anthropology Today?” replied Blair, still wide-eyed, then realised his words might be taken as somewhat insulting. “I mean, wow! That is so good, to know my work gets read, you know? Ah, um, you’re a subscriber, maybe?”

The stranger slurped his coffee.

“Copy in the barber’s. M’names Peregrine.” He extended a gnarled hand which Blair shook, concealing his surprise at the level of erudition in Coachman Lake’s hairdressing establishments.

“So,” continued Peregrine, “you here observin’ the festival? Anthropologically speakin’, as you might say?”

“Something like that,” replied Blair, pleased for a get-out. “I take it you’re not a fan yourself?”

“Goddamn water skis.” This time Peregrine did spit, earning himself a warning glare from Joe the barman. “Destroyin’ the peace ‘n’ quiet, messin’ up the fishin’. I can’t wait ‘til they all go away again.”

“You live here, then?”

“For the past thirty years, I guess. Arrived here one day and never left. Don’t know why, it don’t really suit my health, you know? But this place has a way of holdin’ on to a man.”

Blair nodded sagely, making a mental note to ensure he and Jim were well beyond city limits before any such sense might take hold of them both.

“It’s got a strange name,” he offered politely. “Something to do with the old stagecoach route, maybe, or someone famous?”

“Hah!” Peregrine dropped his beaker on the bar with a bang, and coffee splashed around. “You mean you never heard the story?”

“What story?” asked Blair, his interest piqued far more by this conversation than by Candy’s an-thro-po-logical musings.

“In the 1880s or thereabouts, some guy – French trapper – arrives from the North. Turns up in the nearest town raving about evil spirits at the lake, how they gave him nightmares, and these nightmares told him his wife was being unfaithful to him. Then he shoots himself, right there on Main Street.”

“Wow!” said Blair, “that’s... ah... kind of a depressing story. But what were these evil spirits, did they find out? Some Native American shamanistic activity, or something like that?”

“Nah,” replied Peregrine, pulling out a handkerchief even grubbier than his denim suit and wiping the coffee spills up with it. “They found them old magic mushrooms in his backpack. Guy was high as a kite. He must have got them from the woods around here - there’s plenty. And it turned out that his wife was being unfaithful to him. She’d been sleeping with half of Wisconsin, but that had been before he’d even left home. Somehow the name stuck.”

"Name?" asked Blair, confused, and wondering how 'Mushroom' had transmuted into 'Coachman'.

"*Cauchemar!*" Peregrine breathed the word into Blair's face, and Blair stepped back a little from the coffee fumes. "French for 'nightmare'. Then when more people came to live here, they thought it was too scary a name, and wouldn't attract settlers and business. So it got changed to Coachman. But, you know, I've been around here a long time, Dr Sandburg. Strange things happen at the lake, things a man can't truly explain. People can see weird things up here, even now. I have a feelin' ol' Frenchie saw more'n just fungi."

"Wow!" repeated Blair, genuinely intrigued. He turned a little in his seat to wrangle some change out of his pocket. "Here, let me buy you another coffee..."

But Peregrine had gone.

7.30 am, and Blair sat bolt upright in bed. The gentle snoring emanating from the humped blankets of the bed next to his signalled that, at some time in the early hours after Blair could keep awake no longer, Jim Ellison had returned. Blair picked up one of the limp pillows he'd been sleeping on, and hurled it at the hump.

"Eh, waassup? Wass'is?" Jim thrashed at the blankets, instinctively reaching for his gun.

"Calm down, Joe Friday. Just where the hell were you last night?"

Jim groaned.

"You wake me up to ask me that? Jesus, Sandburg, I was having a nice dream, there..."

"You left me in the bar, you bastard! Then you're out all night..."

"What the hell?" retorted Jim, shaking his head to wake himself up. "Are you channelling my ex-wife? You had your hands full with Cindy, Chrissy, whatever her name was. I could tell you'd have a good time. What's your beef?"

Blair sniffed, and stared at the wall opposite. He wanted to shout: "*I had a crap time. She was a moron, and then a weird old guy started talking to me, and then you didn't come home all night, and why didn't you take me with you?*" Realising this wouldn't be good for his image, he simply said:

"We're a team on this, Jim. I didn't appreciate being left behind."

"Oh, lighten up, Sandburg. We had some beers at the next bar, and when you didn't turn up, we moved on and walked around the lakeshore, looking for possible handover points."

"All night?"

"Hey, he's good company, and I don't have to bend down when I talk to him. No, don't look like that, Chief! Only a joke, honestly. Jesus, what's the time? We'd better get going. I'm meeting Casper at 8.15. We thought we'd go up to the motorcycle track, have a look around."

“I’m coming, too!”

“Fine, Sandburg, whatever. Now, I’m using the bathroom first.”

The door shut and Blair could hear vague sounds of water running from the faucets.

Water lapping at the lakeshore, and the moonlight tripping across the little ripples on the lake’s surface... Jim would have looked magnificent – he always did anyway, but with the moonlight highlighting his handsome features, he would have looked like a hero from ancient times.

But there was another hero on the lakeshore – the kind of companion someone like Hero Jim needed. Tall, strong, blond, muscled... yeah, let’s mention ‘tall’ again, shall we? They would draw closer in the intimate shadows, taking softly, maybe arms brushing, and something about the moonlight and their perfection would mean electricity between them, and then.....

And then a pillow knocked him sideways.

“Sandburg, get your ass out of bed. We’ve got work to do.”

The motorcycle track was a bust – nothing but a dirt field. Jim patrolled the outlying scrub and woodland, and walked around the competitors’ pitches, looking casually at all the equipment on display. Blair, meanwhile, walked in the opposite direction, trying to avoid the attention of Candy Carpenter, who was clearly searching for him.

Casper had been loping around the perimeter looking busy, every now and then drawing Jim’s attention to some alleged anomaly or other that he’d found; looking like a big goofy dog, thought Blair. A pointer, maybe: *‘Look here, Detective Jim! Look what I’ve found for you now, Detective Jim! Can I have a dog-treat? Woof, woof!’*

Blair frowned as the eager young cop lolloped up with yet another offering for his master. Jim sent him on his way again, all but with a pat on the head, and Blair sidled up for some sniping.

“Found a new friend, Jim? Looks like he’s gonna be hard to get rid of, when we leave.”

Jim looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Who says we should get rid of him? He’s looking to move to a bigger city - not much for a young guy to get his teeth into here. Says he’s thinking about applying to Cascade. I said he should give it a go.”

And he walked off after Casper, leaving Blair open-mouthed by the side of the cycle track.

He was just coming in from the corridor when he heard the voices.

“Man,” said Henri Brown, “will you just look at that guy? Is he a super-hero, or something?”

“He got the highest scores at the range” remarked Rafe, sipping at his coffee. “They say he’s gonna get a fast track for the detective post. Quite right, too, I’d say. The guy looks magnificent.”

“Yeah, the kind of person we really want in the PD.” Henri nodded sagely. “He’s almost as tall as Simon, and he’s getting a university degree and everything. I reckon he’s the new Jim Ellison.”

“Well,” grinned Rafe “we’ve not got rid of the old one yet. What a team they’d make. He’s the partner Jim’s been waiting for.”

“Yeah, I think that’s maybe what Simon’s got them in that meeting for, right now.”

And the door to Simon’s office opened on cue, and Jim and Casper came out smiling at each other; a brotherly, or maybe slightly more than brotherly, smile. Jim put his arm over Casper’s shoulders and ruffled his hair.

“Hold on one second, Chief...”

“But I’m Chief!” squeaked Blair from the doorway; no one was listening.

Jim walked over and took Blair’s elbow, bending to speak into his ear in a polite whisper, half an eye still on the grinning fool that was Casper.

“Listen, Sandburg, I was thinking. It’s been a long time since you moved in. I’m sure you’d like to find a place of your own. Don’t worry about me, I’m just fine now. And you know, Casper’s new in town and he really needs a room....”

“Blair! Look out!”

Someone grabbed his arm and he was pulled roughly backwards. He staggered and found himself firmly supported by the familiar bulk of a well-muscled body.

“Jesus, Chief! Are you okay? I thought he was gonna run you down!”

Jim twisted his head and hollered over his shoulder.

“Carpenter, who the hell was that? He could have killed Blair!”

Casper was babbling.

“I don’t know, Jim, I don’t know. I’ll ask the race stewards to find out. He was way off the track! The guy was insane! You okay, Blair?”

Blair looked up to see familiar, concerned blue eyes staring at him.

“You sure you’re okay?” Jim insisted. Blair nodded.

“I guess I was day-dreaming.”

“That’s not the point,” harrumphed Jim. “That guy was riding dangerously. He needs to be disqualified. Come on, let’s get back to base. There’s nothing for us here.”

The woodland glades were beautiful, just beautiful, in their mid-summer finery. And the air was full of the crack and shatter of shotgun cartridge and skeet target meeting in mid-air. Blair covered his ears to muffle the cacophony, and turned to Jim.

“Good luck, man! But you don’t really need it. You’ll wipe the floor with these amateurs.”

Jim smiled warmly at him.

“A shotgun’s not the same as a handgun, Chief. And I need to do some patrolling later, so I can’t draw attention to myself too much....”

“Oh, quit trying to be modest. Go shoot ‘em up!”

Jim gave a bashful grin - maybe Blair’s favourite smile – ruffled his friend’s hair, and loped off towards the shooting area. Out of the corner of his eye, Blair saw Casper looming up with Candy, and his heart fell.

“Hey, Blair, you want to come and watch the action? Candy’s a real fan of skeet-shooting!” Candy was smiling winningly as she held on to Casper’s arm, but then gave her cousin a mock punch.

“Casper, you know I can’t join you now. I have to go do That Thing, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, babe. See you later!”

‘Babe’? thought Blair. *Who calls their cousin ‘babe’?*

And Candy waved at Blair and trotted off, everything bouncing. Casper turned to Blair.

“Let’s get some coffee, and watch Jim’s scoring.”

Well, the guy was trying to be friendly. It wasn’t his fault he was perfect. Painfully, boringly, annoyingly perfect.

“Sure.”

They trotted companionably over the grass, and Casper nodded to a small enclosure to one side of the shooting area where some plastic chairs were lying about.

“How about we wait there? I’ll go get the coffee.” And he loped off again, casting wistful glances towards where Jim was lining up to take his turn. Blair shrugged at the sight, then turned his attention to his friend. He watched the broad back square up to the line, the keen eyes scanning the sky; he saw the muscles in his friend’s arms tense as he waited for the target to be released.

Bam!

Bam!

Bam!

Bam!

There was loud applause at Jim's perfect aim. Jim turned round in grinning delight to catch Blair's eye; Blair beamed, and gave him a victory jump, his fist high in the air.

BAM!

Blair felt something hit him, like a rush of hot wind and burning hailstones. He flinched in mid-air, and, off-balance, toppled to the ground. For a moment, he lay staring at the dirt, his cheek on the warm grass, not quite sure what had happened; it felt like a thunderbolt.

The ground was shaking as feet pounded up.

"Blair! Sandburg!"

Then Jim was on his knees beside him, helping him up.

"Are you okay, Chief? Take it easy now... Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Blair, not quite sure why he was on the ground and what all the fuss was about. "I don't even know what happened, man."

And Jim started pulling roughly at Blair's sweater, tugging it off his shoulders and over his head. Blair fought back weakly.

"Jesus, man! Stop taking my clothes off in front of everyone!"

It was meant as a joke but, to Blair's bemusement, his friend's face was grim as he stared at the sweater. Then Blair saw what Jim was looking at, and his eyes went wide.

In the baggy rear section of the garment, there was a large, ragged, singed hole.

"Casper!" yelled Jim, and Casper came pushing through the small crowd that had gathered, bearing two coffee cups. He dropped them immediately he saw the sweater.

"Jesus, Jim! Blair, are you okay?"

"I wish," said Blair crossly, "that people would stop asking me that, already."

"Who the hell fired that shot, Casper? The motorcycle could have been an accident, but two attempts to hurt Blair in one day is no coincidence!"

"I don't know, Jim. I'll ask folk, find out what happened."

Casper turned and started running towards the judges' enclosure. Jim reached down to Blair and gave him a hand up, pulling him close as he got to his feet.

"You've got to keep your eyes open here, Chief. Something real funny's going on. No more day-dreaming, okay?"

Blair nodded, still staring dumbly, and a bit dejectedly, at his dead sweater. It was still chilly, and that had been the only one in the suitcase.

It was late afternoon when Blair finally got out of the First Aid hut, having had numerous shotgun pellets taken out of his flank and thigh. It hadn't hurt much at the time, oddly - the wounds were mainly stinging - but he was acutely conscious of how lucky he had been. If he hadn't jumped at just that moment – well, the cartridge could have blown a hole right through him.

It was a point clearly not lost on Jim. All the way back to the lake in the truck, Blair had been crammed close to his side, with Casper relegated to the far corner of the cab, a side-lined participant. Blair was cheap enough to regard taking a shotgun cartridge fair exchange for getting one-up on Casper. But no sooner than he'd got to the First Aiders, Jim had left him on his own.

"You're should be okay now, Chief. Just stay with the crowds. Better still, stay in here. I just have to go and finish the water-ski section this afternoon." He'd smiled kindly. "Too bad we can't do the water-ski pairs, now you're injured."

And with that, and a hesitant hand on Blair's shoulder – Blair himself had been face down on a camp-bed with his pants around his ankles at the time – he had just stalked off, leaving Blair feeling even more miserable than before and, to make matters worse, really starting to suffer the painful annoyance of his wounds.

Swallowing down some painkillers with lemonade, he pulled on Jim's jacket (ah, that had been a nice gesture) and defied instructions to go to watch the show from the lakeshore. The waves were whipping up the water even more than the previous day, and the afternoon sky was bright and clear. Blair gave an involuntary shiver.

"I know you secretly want to have a go at the barefoot," Jim had said the day before, coming up to him already kitted out in a wetsuit, and carrying a spare suit for Blair. "It doesn't matter if you're rusty. You'll be fine."

It might not matter if I was just rusty, Blair had thought bitterly, but it makes a hell of a difference if I've never water-skied in my life.

"Let's see tomorrow, man," he had said, with a weak smile. "I'm really feeling the chill here..."

...They smiled at each other, and Jim slapped him on his rubber-suited back.

"Lookin' good, Chief. I can tell you're a real natural at this."

They settled into the water and each took hold of an individual tow rope. The speedboat revved, and the driver edged forward, taking up the slack on the rope.

"Here we go!" shouted Jim, with a grin.

Blair felt himself pulled up out of the water, and there he was, with his bare feet skimming across the surf of the lake, the wind whipping at his hair. The waves slapped at his soles and the boat's exhaust was sharp in his nostrils. It was exhilarating. The boat picked up speed and they were skimming in a shower of spray, in perfect symmetry. He glanced over at Jim and at the man's broad smile.

"Great, huh?" shouted Jim.

Blair gave a grin in return, and they settled back against the pull of the rope and the hard surface of the water; it felt like flying. They banked and spray curled over them, rainbows in the air. Then they straightened up again for a long, fast stretch; he looked across, and saw pride in Jim's face.

"You're doing just great, Chief!" Jim shouted, and edged closer. Then, to Blair's amazement, Jim looped one foot into the tow-rope and, still skiing on one foot, reached over and took Blair in a headlock. Blair laughed out loud with the sheer heady joy of it all, and put out an arm to take hold of Jim.

And the world turned upside-down in a wall of water, and there was spray all around, and then Blair was just bobbing in the wake of the boat. Jim was skiing on, looking back in disappointment...

"Oh, okay," Jim had said, turning away with a frown. "If you don't want to, maybe Casper will help out."

"Maybe I'm coming down with something..." Blair had offered to his retreating back. *Yeah*, he had thought to himself, *coming down with a rabid case of jealousy*. And just where the hell had that come from? Just why had he suddenly realised that Jim Ellison was not just best friend and soul-mate, but something else as well – something much more...

As he took off after Jim, limping slightly, Candy Carpenter pranced up, her shorts as pink as her lip-gloss, her arms wide. For Blair, it literally added insult to injury.

"Oh, Blair, baby! Casper told me what happened! Let me kiss it better for you!"

"Lady," he snapped in exasperation, "will you get the hell out of my face?"

He left her speechless on the lakeshore, and strode off towards the water-ski area through a line of buff young sports jocks, who stood open-mouthed to watch the man who had rejected the most bodacious babe at the festival. Blair lifted his chin higher. Blair Sandburg was above such frippery, now. Oh yessiree, way above it.

Down by the shoreline, he scanned the participants – no Jim. He waited a few more minutes, then started to feel anxious. He wasn't out on the course, he wasn't waiting with the others; too much had been going on for Blair to just dismiss this. He walked briskly to the judges, who just as briskly dismissed him, telling him that Jim Ellison hadn't been wanted for another two hours and had gone off to practice.

Blair looked around for Casper, but he had disappeared as well. Dammit! He stomped down to stand by the water's edge, where he was holding a hand up to his eyes to shade them from the glare when he was conscious of a coffee-soaked presence at his side.

"Your friend's out on the lake," said Peregrine, mirroring Blair's posture and pointing with his other hand. "Way out. I can see them in that green speeder on the other side."

"You can see...?" Blair frowned and looked again. It seemed miles away. "You can really see that far?"

Peregrine turned and smiled, a little lopsidedly, as if smiling was not a familiar expression for him.

“I can see a lot further than that, Dr Sandburg, as you maybe can imagine. But that’s where he is.”

Blair dropped his hand and stared, his jaw dropping, at the battered, ancient, self-contained man by his side.

“You mean...” he started, and then a somewhat more important thought came crashing through to the fore of his consciousness.

“What do you mean, you can see *them*?”

“That Carpenter jerk’s out there, drivin’ the speeder,” replied Peregrine, still looking out across the lake. Then he turned to look at Blair, his eyes kind.

“Better take care of him, Dr Sandburg. He’s one in a million. You know that.”

He turned and strode off into the crowd. Blair pulled himself together and ran after him, following the Stetson as it bobbed between the heads of the crowd. Pushing through the throng, he found himself by a jetty. A bright red speedboat was just unmooring.

“Who’s that out there?” Blair shouted to the driver, who was revving the engine and pulling away. “Right out there on the far side?”

The other man squinted across the water.

“That’s Carpenter with the new guy,” he yelled back. “I saw them earlier. He said they were going over there to practice, but it’s not a good place to ski – too many rocks.” The boat picked up speed.

“Police!” hollered Blair, wishing he had his ID card. “I need your boat! I need to get over there. Someone’s in danger!”

Out of earshot by now, the guy in the red boat just waved and sped away. Blair stood in exasperation on the jetty, staring across the lake. Dammit! Everything was coming together now; the conveniently food-poisoned police department, the glamorous so-called cousin forcing her attentions on Blair, Casper’s doglike attention to Jim’s every move, not to mention the bike and the shotgun. What if the Carpenters were the drug ring in person? And Jim was now with Casper, far away from witnesses in an area not safe for skiing, being pulled through rocks like a toy on a string.

Blair whirled around. On the other side of the jetty, which he was pretty sure had been unoccupied before, a blue speedboat was moored up with its engine idling. A battered Stetson was draped over the throttle.

Blair looked around for Peregrine but the man was nowhere in sight.

“Get the police!” he shouted to the crowd; some turned to look at him quizzically. “Get the officials! I need help on the far side of the lake! Something’s going on, something bad’s going on!”

And with that, he leapt into the boat, slipping the mooring rope with a dexterity that surprised him. Dropping the grimy Stetson into the bottom of the boat, he pushed the throttle forward.

With too much power, the blue speedboat took off with a wall of wash curling over its bow. Blair banked to one side and got the craft onto an even keel, then twisted the wheel, his palm hard against the throttle. He pointed the bow at the distant figures and, with a roar, he was off, flying across the water, seeing blurs of colour that were other boats, and the open mouths of shouting contestants as he cut straight through the water-ski course, leaving flailing skiers and stalling engines in his wake.

Faster, faster faster; the wind whipped his hair back.

"I can see further than that."

One Sentinel looking after another?

"Better take care of him, Dr Sandburg. He's one in a million."

Oh yeah, he was that all right, Sentinel or no. Jim Ellison was Blair Sandburg's one in a million.

Closer and closer. Blair throttled back to pinpoint where he was headed. Now, he could see the situation better, and it wasn't good. Jim was no longer upright on the water. He was swimming for the shore, but Carpenter's speedboat was circling round him like a big green shark, dipping and snarling and trying to catch Jim with its propeller. Jim was diving constantly to avoid the slicing metal, and was making no real headway towards dry land. He must already be exhausted.

Blair gunned the blue boat's engine, making off again in a broad wave of water and heading straight for Carpenter.

The green boat made another pass, and Blair saw this time that Jim's dive was very shallow and he was quick to resurface, gasping. But now Carpenter had heard the blue boat over the roar of his own engine, and turned towards Blair as if to ram him. Blair snarled, and twisted the wheel to turn the boat aside, pretending to flee. He saw Carpenter change direction for another pass at Jim. This was what Blair had hoped for. With the green boat's side exposed, Blair brought the wheel hard round and the blue boat turned on a dime.

He sped past Jim. This had gone beyond merely rescue; Blair had to remove the threat or Jim would not be safe. His face hard, he kept his hand pressed onto the throttle, and saw Carpenter's face pale with horror as the blue boat headed straight for his side, with its thrashing engine ready to rip up anything in its path.

Carpenter hesitated for a split second, then gunned his own engine and the green boat leapt forward, Blair passing across its stern with a hair's breadth to spare. The blue boat tossed crazily in the frothing wake. Carpenter was now heading at full speed, parallel to the shore. Blair throttled back so that the blue boat drifted to a standstill.

Gone, he thought. *Dammit.*

But the green boat suddenly reared up, its nose pointing at forty-five degrees from the surface, and tipped sideways. Blair saw a dark shadow under the water beneath its hull. Then the speeder flipped over, its propeller thrashing madly in the air. Blair thought he saw

Carpenter tumble into the lake, but a second later the boat came crashing down again and the propeller was churning through the water.

He dragged his eyes away from the scene and turned back to Jim, who was splashing weakly towards the blue boat, his stroke that of an exhausted man. Blair put the throttle up a notch briefly, then let the motor idle as he leaned over the side and helped Jim into the boat; not an easy task, but eventually Jim sat slumped against the side, grunting, before giving Blair a grateful smile. When Jim had got some of his breath back, Blair helped him onto one of the seats and started checking for injuries, running his hands over Jim's back and flanks, his legs and arms, looking for rents in the suit, or wounds. He tried not to think about how lucky he was, not to be dealing with chopped meat.

After a few moments of Blair's less-than-expert medical check-up, Jim grabbed his friend's hands to still them, and held on, forcing Blair to look at him.

"I'm okay, Chief, he said, earnestly. "I'm fine, thanks to you. I might not have lasted much longer."

He squeezed Blair's hands, and Blair squeezed back, smiling. Then Blair's face clouded, and he straightened up to look back to where the green boat's wreckage floated.

"You should have waited for me, man. You should know by now not to leave me out of things."

"Yeah, yeah, tell me about it." Jim looked away, clearly a little abashed. "The worst of it is, I didn't really spot what he was going to do until it was too late. Oh, I had my doubts about him already. Too many coincidences – the poisoned pizza that took out all his colleagues, for example; the way Candy Carpenter shadowed him, and seemed to be taking instructions. I could spot them in the crowds, having these quick conversations."

"If you're right, I guess Candy will have high-tailed it by now."

"Yeah, we'll get an APB out on her when we get back to shore. I had my suspicions about what was going on after that first night. I'd just been teasing you, Chief. I didn't go out drinking with him. I got rid of him early and then spent most of the night just walking around, trying to spot where the deliveries might take place. Then I realised that the most mobile things at the festival were the boats themselves. I walked out along the shoreline – way out, heading up towards the airstrip - and found a couple of speeders moored in secret. That green one, and this blue one here. I checked them over. There was nothing there then, but I could sense a trace of chemicals. They turned up at the festival later the next morning. I reckon they'd been out to the airstrip, or to a delivery point at the top of the lake. Then the Carpenters could bring the packages back to the festival and start distributing the next day."

"And they'd hide the drugs..." - Blair looked around him - "...where exactly?"

Jim grinned and pointed at the duckboards.

"Try the bilge, Chief."

Blair crouched down and hauled up the hatch to the bilge, peering into the void below. The smell of stale water wafted up and Jim wrinkled his nose, then smiled to himself.

“They’re down there, Chief. Can you see them?”

Blair lay flat and reached further in, then pulled himself up, his right arm dripping and his hand clutching a well-wrapped parcel about the size of a brick.

“There are more down there, I think,” he said, and tossed the package onto the deck. He was still frowning.

“You had these suspicions, Jim. You knew all this stuff by the end of the first night, and you thought it better not to tell me about it, huh?”

Jim stared at the hole in the duckboards, rather than look at Blair.

“Sorry, Chief. At first I thought this was going to be a joke assignment, and you didn’t need the hassle. You’ve been working hard enough lately. I thought I could do the investigating and you could have a relaxing time. But once I got wind of what was going on, I just wanted to keep you out of the firing line. Especially after that first so-called accident with the motorcycle. When the second one happened – well, I wasn’t thinking straight. I reckon he hoped if he took you out of the picture, I’d be too distracted to care about the drug operation.” Jim looked up with a wry smile. “He’d have been right.”

“And when that failed, he brought you out here to kill you, then say it was an accident. You were too far away for people to see what was going on.” He corrected himself. “Most people, that is.”

He looked towards the rocks where the green boat had smashed itself.

“Carpenter went too close in,” he said quietly. “These rocks are common knowledge. He was maybe trying to lead us in to wreck us, but got caught out himself.” He turned back to glare at Jim.

“How the hell did you manage to wind up here, Jim, waiting to be turned into ground beef?”

Jim shook his head tiredly.

“I wasn’t ready to collar Carpenter just yet. I wanted to get some more evidence tonight, catch him in the act. Until then I needed to play along. So this was just supposed to be a practice before my heat in the competition. I knew we had to come further out from the course. I didn’t realise until we were way over that he had other plans, but by then it was too late to bail. In the middle of the lake, I’d be too exposed. I managed to hang on until I got closer to land. I didn’t know about the rocks. He started to swing me out over them, so I’d crash and hit them, I suppose. That’s when I took a dive to try to swim for land, but... well, the boat was faster than me.”

He gave Blair a rueful grin. Blair just glared back.

“No kidding? You still let him take you away from back-up, even though you suspected what he was up to. Jim, that was crazy in the extreme.”

Jim looked bashful.

“I concede, Chief. Not my finest hour.”

“You’ve got to give up this self-sacrificing shit, man. It’s gone on too long.” Blair turned towards the water again. “So you didn’t think he was a great cop, that he could transfer to Cascade?” he muttered, unable to push the issue aside.

“What? Are you kidding? I was yanking your chain, Chief! To be honest, I thought he was a klutz; a third-rate dirty cop. A bad call on my part. I dunno why I was so off-key with this one. There’s a funny thing – an *atmosphere* - about this lake. My senses haven’t been at their best since we got here. It’s like there’s something interfering with them. I’ve been feeling less than top notch, to tell you the truth.”

As his back was still turned, Blair could hide his private smile of triumph.

“I have it on good authority, Jim, that this place can mess with your head. Don’t blame yourself. You know...” – he turned back again and gave Jim an arch look - “...even you can have an off-day.”

They smiled at each other for a moment, then Jim raised an eyebrow.

“So, you still get angry about me and my personal safety issues, huh? Even after all these years?” His face was full of affectionate amusement.

“You bet I still get angry,” retorted Blair, responding to the jibe with another glare. “It’s my job to take care of you.”

“Oh, yeah? I thought it was the other way round.”

A realisation, and its essential truth, suddenly struck Blair, and he grinned broadly.

“Get real, Ellison. I’m in charge here, and I’m staying in charge.”

Jim looked at him for a moment, then his face broke into one of Blair’s favourite bashful smiles.

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that,” he replied.

There was a quiet, smiling moment or two, as they felt that basic understanding slot into place, then Blair helped Jim settle in the bow. He turned to the wheel and gently pushed the throttle up a notch, pointing their blue boat back towards the shoreline. He had to navigate carefully; the guy in the red boat had been right - there were plenty of rocks close to the surface.

After a few hundred yards, Blair throttled back so that their craft drifted gently and they both peered over the side into the red-tinged water by the wreckage. Then Blair moved the blue boat astern as a mark of decorum and respect for the dead, however crooked the dead might have been, and they waited in contented silence until the officials’ boats finally made it across the lake.

≈≈≈ *fin* ≈≈≈