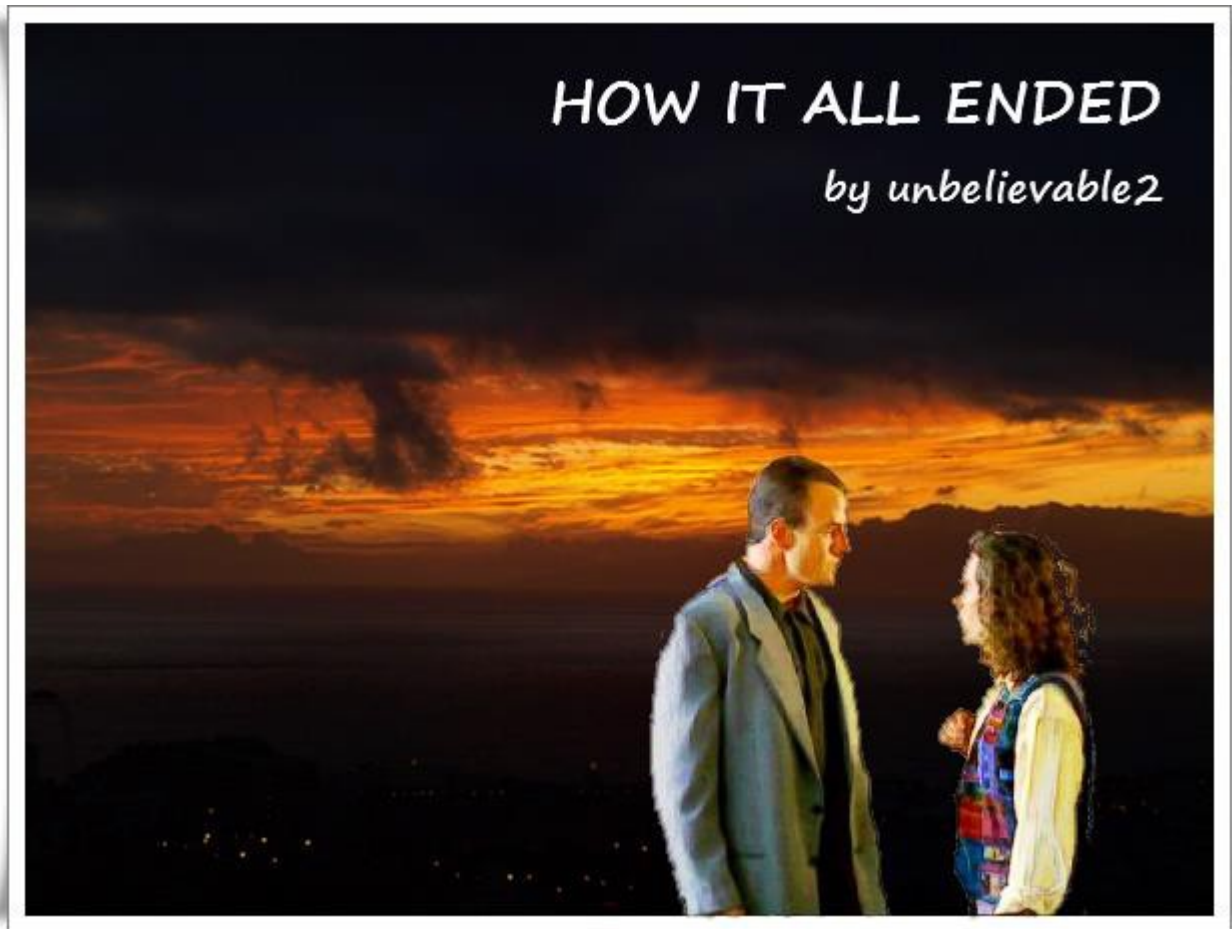


How It All Ended



Story by unbelievable2
Art by banbury

1.

Simon Banks pulled into the beach parking lot and drew up in an empty space. The car that had been shadowing him stopped a few yards behind and the driver got out. Simon heaved a large sigh, snapped on some dark glasses and opened the driver's door, sliding his long legs out of the cramped vehicle. Almost immediately, he felt fine sand trickling over the tops of his shoes and into his socks. Barely hiding his deep dislike of the sensation, he stood and walked to the other man, who was now leaning on the hood of his own car, staring down the beach at the many surfers dotted around in the water; some paddling out to sea, some trying to ride the gentle swell.

"Thanks again for bringing me down here, Captain Swann. It's good of you to take the time."

The other man turned and gave Simon a genuine smile.

"No problem, Captain. Always happy to assist one of our own. Monterey's a pretty small place, I know - especially compared to cities like Cascade, but it's complex enough to find

your way around. The coastline has so many bends in it, and there are so many beaches, you could have been looking all day."

"Is he actually here?" asked Simon, shading his eyes and squinting down towards the shining water.

Swann pointed into the glare.

"When you said you were coming down, I had a patrolman keep an eye out for him. He's the big guy with the all-red board."

And pretty quickly, Simon picked out the flash of red. The man was a fair distance away, but his height and distinctively confident stride through the shallows were instantly recognisable; Jim Ellison.

Swann was still talking.

"Not that he's any trouble, of course. He's a pretty model citizen; doesn't drink, doesn't go to bars, doesn't get caught up with the rough crowd. Even on the beach it seems like the others have got wind that he was a cop, and the troublemakers tend to stay clear. Not that he invites any involvement with them. Just comes to the beach – usually here on State Beach, or maybe Marina, or sometimes Lover's Point. He's on one or other every day; surfs if the waves are good, stares at the sea if he can't. Then he goes home again."

Simon gave another sigh.

"Guess I'd better get it done. Captain Swann, I'm much obliged. I'll be able to find my way to the hotel, no problem. Don't let me keep you any longer."

Swann could clearly detect a gentle nudge.

"Sure thing. Give me a call when you're leaving town?"

Simon nodded, and the two men shook hands amicably. Swann's car took off, and Simon was left in his smart clothes and polished shoes on the edge of a beach, sticking out like a sore thumb amongst the Bermuda shorts and t-shirts and bikinis.

"Should have thought about goin' undercover," he muttered to himself, and started down the slope of sand towards the water, slipping uncomfortably deeper at every step. The fresh breeze off the sea did nothing to dispel the sweat beading his brow, nor his general dark mood. Not only did he feel like a fish out of water here – and boy, did that seem like an appropriate expression for the location – but he was not looking forward to this meeting with his erstwhile detective.

That meeting took a while to come together. The big man with the red board showed no signs of leaving the water in a hurry, despite Simon's attempt to hail him. Even Simon could see it was hardly a perfect surfing day – the surfers were finding it difficult to find a decent wave – but Jim was the most persistent, remaining in the water long after most had given up and gone to lounge on the beach. Simon had long ago given up himself. Folding his jacket neatly and rolling up his shirt-sleeves, he had moved to sit higher up the beach, where he finally took off his shoes and socks, and concluded that, if anything, the new sensation of sand between his toes was even worse than what he'd felt before.

He was sure Jim knew he was there. He had seen the man stare fixedly at him when he stood at the water's edge, and, since then, Jim had turned frequently to scan the beach, invariably pausing when his eyes raked the area where Simon was sitting. So, Jim's natural caution - not to say paranoia - was still in evidence. Simon wondered idly whether these were Ranger skills he was seeing, or whether those Sentinel senses were still functioning.

At last, as the sun dipped further and the breeze fell away, Jim picked up his board and made his way through the shallows and up the beach – a good 50 yards from where Simon was sitting. Simon had to leap up quickly, grabbing his discarded shoes and jacket, and scramble awkwardly across the patch of sand between them to catch up.

“Jim! Jim, wait up!”

The man with the surfboard didn't falter.

“Ellison! I know you can hear me, you sonofabitch! Slow down, for Pete's sake!”

Jim paused, heaved a sigh of exasperation and threw down his board, turning to face him.

Simon strode as best he could over the remaining yards of treacherous sand. More than two years down the track and approaching his mid-forties, the guy was still an impressive sight; tall, bronzed, athletic. But the sun was now at Simon's back and, without the glare, he could see Jim's face illuminated mercilessly; distant eyes, lines of age and fatigue, and a cold, hard expression.

“Hello, Simon.” The voice was flat and cold, as well. “This is a surprise. I'd say I was pleased to see you, but – well – I'd be lying, wouldn't I?”

“To be frank, Jim...”

“Yeah, you're good at that, being frank.”

Simon frowned, but kept his temper down.

“To be frank, I don't want to be here myself. But as you refuse to answer your phone or return my calls, there was no option. I need to talk to you, in an official capacity, and you need to listen.”

“Well, I didn't expect you to be here in any other capacity,” replied Jim, clearly intending a jibe. He unzipped his wet suit and rolled it off his shoulders, then dropped to the sand and stretched out his legs, staring out to sea.

“I've taken time to come down here to talk to you...”

“That was real big of you.”

Simon threw his shoes down on the sand and stood over the seated man, who didn't deign to look up.

“I've taken time” he continued “- my own time - when I could have just sent you an official letter. That's what Personnel wanted to do. I got a stay of execution for you, on the basis that I would speak to you personally. But if you're going to act like this, then I've got that letter right here.”

He pulled an envelope out of his inner jacket pocket and threw it down in Jim's lap. Jim looked at it without interest. Simon paused for a moment, then snorted in exasperation and bent to pick up his shoes.

"Consider it delivered," he snapped. He had already turned on his heel to leave when Jim spoke up.

"Termination of my employment with the Cascade PD?"

Simon turned back to glare at him.

"Yep. What do you think? You took off without notice, you've stayed away for well over two years, you've long ago exceeded any statutory responsibility by the PD, especially as you refused to receive any counselling, and you've failed to reply to any correspondence. As far as the PD were concerned, they were going to mail the letter to your last known address and cut you loose."

Jim picked up the envelope at one corner and dropped it unopened on the sand.

"Fine, do it. I don't care. I've no intention of coming back, I've no intention of being a cop in Cascade ever again. Let them strike me from their records. I couldn't give a rat's ass."

Simon retraced his steps and sat down gingerly on the sand next to the other man.

"Jim, why do you want to give up your career? You're a great cop – an exceptional cop – you know that; with or without the whole goddamn' Sentinel stuff..."

Jim snorted.

"I think that reputation was pretty much destroyed two and a half years ago, don't you? That's certainly the view everyone expressed to me, as I recall."

The voice was bitter.

"Jim, it was *not* your fault. Surely you've worked that out? Anyone who says otherwise, then or now, is an asshole. That was an impossible situation and you were incapacitated, just like any cop could have been. No one should blame you for that."

"Well they can and they did. And I do. People *died*, Simon! The senses took me out and people *died*."

"Not because of what you did. You were exonerated by Internal Affairs. You couldn't help what happened to you. The situation was no win."

"That's not what the Press said."

Simon gave Jim a derisive look.

"Since when did you worry about what the Press said?"

Jim was still staring stonily out to sea.

"Since they barrack my home, and my dad's, spread rumours of my cowardice, create such a storm of innuendo that even my closest friends start questioning what happened," - Jim

gave Simon a cold glance sideways - “ and start taking sides with Authority and drawing conclusions...”

“Dammit, Jim!” Simon’s temper was rising again. “I had to ask those questions! It was my job to, you know that. But you, you just took off, refused to cooperate, shut up like a clam. You were impossible to deal with and helping you was a real struggle. You didn’t let us.”

There was silence for a moment. Simon heard the waves swishing up the sand, and the cries of gulls wheeling over some picnic remains further off along the beach. Finally, Jim took a breath.

“I’m damaged goods, Simon; a liability. I have been for years, but in the PD’s eyes, after Sandburg’s Dissertation hit the fan, I turned into a problem, not an asset. Culpepper Mall was what they were waiting for, and something I should have foreseen. Because I didn’t, people died.”

“Bullshit! All of it! I never thought Jim Ellison would resort to self-pity!”

“Shows how well you know me, then, doesn’t it?” Jim gave Simon a twist of a smile and stood up, brushing sand off his backside. He bent to pick up his board. Simon scrambled up as well, picking up the discarded letter as he did so.

“So, what’s your answer?”

“You haven’t been listening, Simon. I don’t care. Do what you like.”

“Well, *you* might not think of yourself as a cop anymore, but someone else out there may. You remember Dawson Quinn? Just before I left Cascade I heard that he’d escaped from his latest penitentiary. Would you believe, he’d been moved to a low-risk rehab facility?” Simon shook his head. “He always swore vengeance on you, Jim. Keep an eye out, huh?”

Jim shrugged.

“It would take him a good while to hitchhike from Tacoma to Monterey. I reckon he’s got better targets closer to home. Keep an eye out for yourself, Simon.”

“Can we at least talk again before I go back to Cascade? Not about this – Quinn or the PD. Just two guys who knew each other, being pleasant to each other for a change? Maybe a beer, huh? I’m at the Mariposa.”

Jim’s eyes were hooded as he considered.

“Maybe. Ring me tomorrow.”

He started walking away up the beach.

“Well, answer your goddamn’ phone if I do!”

Jim flipped a hand in reply. Simon raised his voice to be heard over the sea-sounds.

“Have you spoken to Sandburg?”

Jim stopped short; he didn’t turn around. After a moment he spoke, his voice tight.

“Just why in hell would I do that?”

Simon watched him as he marched on up the beach and away.

2.

After the heat and blustery weather of the afternoon, the Mariposa Hotel in the calm of the early evening was a haven. Simon had surreptitiously poured more sand out of his shoes before he got out of the car, and hoped he wasn't looking too disreputable after his time on the beach, because the hotel lobby was all cool elegance, despite a crowd of guests waiting to be checked in. Swann had got him a room there, on the Monterey PD, which was kind indeed, Simon thought. Even if the encounter with Jim had been a bust, he could have a good meal, maybe take a turn around the coast in the next couple of days, and work some of his own frustration and unhappiness at the situation out of his system.

He deeply regretted losing Jim as a friend, and could not grasp how the man had changed. As he waited to be checked in at the highly-polished wood desk, his mind roved back, as it frequently did, to the days when the madness of Major Crimes had been enlivened by the dream-team of Ellison and Sandburg, and the warm working partnership that the three of them had shared.

How had that all gone wrong? True, Sandburg's Dissertation, or rather the “fake” document, had set the two men at odds, but Simon had thought that had been sorted. Yet for months Blair had made excuses about when he would take up the offer of a job at the PD; then, close to a year after the flak had died down, he had abruptly packed up, and left for a job in the East.

Simon had been disappointed, but at the same time genuinely pleased for the young man, knowing that he had needed to complete his doctorate. It was only after Blair had left, and Jim's demeanour had changed so markedly, that he realised that he had been oblivious to a rift of monumental proportions.

And Sandburg wasn't coming back.

He had hurt for Jim then. He knew how close the two had been. Despite their difficulties - and the Lord knew that Jim Ellison could be a sonofabitch at times, so Sandburg's patience had been exemplary - he thought their friendship had been sound. Whatever had broken it had sent Jim back to the dark days of bitterness and self-absorption. The massive foul-up of Culpepper Mall had been a last straw.

So when he heard the familiar voice, he thought it was all part of his day-dream.

“Seriously, man, I can assure you these rooms were all booked by the Museum of Art. I'm one of a party of five from John Hopkins. We reconfirmed yesterday. Sandburg, Blair Sandburg.”

Simon turned to stare in disbelief at the speaker, who was leaning over the counter a few guests down, pointing with ill-disguised impatience at names on a monitor.

“See?” the voice continued. “Here we are, all one group booking. So we’d really appreciate getting checked in, pronto, you know? We’ve still got lots of setting up to do.”

He was still the same Blair. Oh, the hair was shorter than before – not too much, but *neater*, somehow - and the clothes were markedly smarter, now with a touch of mature style that had always eluded the guy in the past. He seemed to be in charge of the small party that milled around him. Simon opened his mouth to call out a greeting, when a concierge loomed into his vision. In the confusion about who was carrying the bag and whether he needed to swipe his credit card despite the PD’s generosity, his attention wavered and, when he looked again, Blair was gone.

Simon dumped his stuff in his room, then pulled out his cell-phone and dialed.

“Ellison. Leave a message.”

“Jim, just answer this goddamn thing sometimes, huh? Listen, you will *never* believe this, but guess who I’ve just seen checking into the Mariposa? Sandburg! I mean, can you believe it? I haven’t been able to speak to him yet, but, man, what are the odds of him turning up, hey? I think he’s something to do with an exhibition at the Museum of Art. Ring any bells? Come up to the hotel, and see him! Please?”

Suddenly embarrassed at his own show of emotion, Simon clicked off the phone and busied himself in changing quickly into something more suitable for wandering around Monterey. He headed down to the lobby again, but there was no sign of Sandburg or his group.

He sighed as he felt the brief euphoria fade away as quickly as it had appeared, then shrugged and walked out into the evening for a stroll. Maybe it would be better to find Blair later, after the guy had settled in. For himself, it was a pleasure to be in the pretty streets of the town, and he tried to distract himself by taking in the sights. A few blocks north, he passed an elegant whitewashed building bedecked with colourful banners bearing the words: “Ellery Watts – a retrospective”. The name meant nothing to Simon, but he saw that the exhibition was opening the following evening. There was a steady stream of people going in and out, carrying boxes and trays of glasses, and as he watched the activity he saw a small, quiet figure sitting on the steps, leafing through some papers and glancing at a cell phone as he did so.

Simon hurried across the street, his pace slowing only as he reached the steps, suddenly tentative. Sandburg had closed his phone and was standing up, ready to move away.

“Blair?”

The young man looked up in open surprise, an expression that quickly closed and hardened into one of polite civility.

“Simon. Well, well, well. What brings you here?”

Boy, you couldn’t sound less interested if you tried, thought Simon, grimly.

“You here for the exhibition?” he countered, a past-master as answering a question with a question.

Blair waved a hand at the building.

“Ellery was an old friend of Naomi’s when she lived around here. He’s been gone a while now so it’s great they’re showing his paintings again in such a fine gallery. The show’s being organised by a co-university art group - Ellery was from Baltimore originally, you see - and I kind of volunteered to help out, on account of the personal connection. I thought it would be a good thing to do – for Mom, you know?”

"Naomi's here, too?"

"Ah, no, she's not."

Sandburg’s face still looked young, thought Simon. The eyes were still wide and deep blue, the high cheek-bones and full lips were still the same, but the animation of old was no longer there, instead replaced by an undeniable air of sadness and fatigue.

A million things to ask were on the tip of his tongue. Instead he said:

“Come and get a burger with me?”

Blair moved his beer bottle in a small circle on the table, seemingly engrossed in the process. Finally he said:

“In Monterey? You don’t say?”

Simon had hoped for a somewhat more emphatic response; this dull air of unconcern was so unlike the Sandburg of old.

“It would be really good if you could talk to him, Sandburg. I can’t get through any more. The PD are finished with him, and as it stands it’s just as well. I haven’t seen him this closed-off for ... well, since the days before the two of you met up. He’s switched off, won’t let anyone near him. And that was the case for months after you moved. In the end, something like the Mall fiasco was bound to happen, I guess. He was burned out and isolated. I should have spotted the signs and I failed him as his superior officer. God knows, I feel bad about that. I should have looked out for him better, though he made it all so damn difficult. It’s why I won’t let the PD terminate his status until I’ve had a chance to talk it out with him, finally.”

“Well, good luck with that.”

Their conversation had been civil thus far, but now Simon felt his pent-up aggravation burst out.

“You know, don’t you, that this whole thing started when you left?”

Blair put the beer bottle down with a crack on the table-top.

“You reckon, Simon? Well, I’m just peachy with you offloading your guilt onto me for what’s gone wrong. Because at the time, you might recall, my presence felt superfluous in the extreme. The PD and Jim, both, were less than supportive in the Dissertation kerfuffle, and nothing that happened in the months afterwards made me feel that encouraged, to be honest. Oh, I exonerate you, sure - you were injured and out of the game for a while. But things had changed quite a lot for me, for both of us.”

There was silence for a moment; Simon conscious that he had misjudged things, Blair just brooding.

"I heard about Culpepper Mall," said Blair suddenly. Simon frowned.

"You did? Well, then you know what went down with Jim, at least in part. Didn't you think it might have helped if you'd come back?"

Blair gave Simon a sharp look, then turned his attention to the table again. His voice was cold.

"I didn't find out about it until long after the event. And anyway, I had other things on my mind just then. If you were so concerned, why didn't you get hold of me yourself?"

Simon glanced away.

"I didn't know where you were."

"You're a cop, Simon. You could have found out easily enough."

Simon shrugged, uncomfortable with the line of questioning, but Blair now seemed engrossed in pulling the label off his beer bottle.

"Speaking as an outside observer," - Blair's voice had switched back to absent curiosity - "and from what I've heard, Culpepper Mall seemed to me a bad deal that wasn't humanly possible to get out of without serious casualties. The Mall security was a mess, and the cops who got inside, including Jim, were in a no-win situation, trying to deal with those hostage-takers. Everything was stacked against them. I don't see why he was vilified for it."

Simon took a big swig of his beer, angry, but forcing himself not to press the issue.

"That's how I see it, too; more importantly, that's how IA saw it. Jim was judged to have been completely blameless. He was incapacitated before the final assault. But no one understood the whole zone thing, and Jim did nothing to explain what had happened to him; too worried about the Sentinel business coming out again, I suppose. What happened, of course, was that he'd zoned with the sirens and the percussion bombs that the SWAT team were using. No one knew what the hell was going on, and Jim was left in a daze when the rest of his team made a rush on the terrorists. There were a lot of fatalities. It was foolhardy, and if Jim had had his full faculties I'd damned sure he would have put a stop to it. As it was, when the mop-up team arrived, they found him pretty much catatonic. Somehow a popular myth emerged that Ellison hid; I never found out who was responsible but, in the absence of any explanation about why he failed to go in with the team, it was difficult to talk it down, and the Press had a field day. The PD had too much on its plate, clearing up the rest of the debacle, to go in to bat much for him. He got a lot of aggravation - really poisonous - and his family were involved as well. Eventually, he just upped and left. It took us a while to track him here, and the local guys have kept a discreet watch on him for the last couple of years."

"Bastards," said Blair quietly to his beer-bottle, clearly not meaning the local cops. Simon sighed heavily again.

"To be honest, I really don't know what I'm doing here. I had the mad idea that I might be able to persuade him to come back, but I don't really know whether the PD would even have

him on the team again. Oh, I think enough time has elapsed for people to take a more balance view of what went down. It would help so much if he could come clean about the Sentinel stuff – that would clear up what doubt remains. But irrespective of all that, in his current state I don't see him able to work the streets anymore. Worst of all is the total lack of any vital spark in him; no life in his eyes."

"Anyone who thinks Jim Ellison is a coward needs their head examining," Blair muttered to his beer bottle. "And they need to take some instruction from me."

He straightened up to look straight at Simon.

"And you say he's just been here, surfing all this time?"

"Yep, like a cross between a monk and a beach-bum."

Blair snorted, his first sign of amusement so far.

"Yeah, that would be Jim. Look, Simon, I don't know what you want me to do. I don't have that connection with Jim anymore. It was lost a long time before Culpepper, a long time before I left. He wouldn't listen to me."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, yes, I do. Believe me."

Simon couldn't hold back the question – the ultimately prying question – after all this time.

"I don't understand it, Blair. What went wrong between you two? There was nothing stronger."

Blair gave him a sad smile.

"You want to know how it all ended, Simon? It's very simple. I let him down, my best friend. The Dissertation was like a knife between us. It cut us part. He never forgave me for betraying him, and I've never forgiven myself."

He stood, pulled a twenty from his pocket, and placed it on the table.

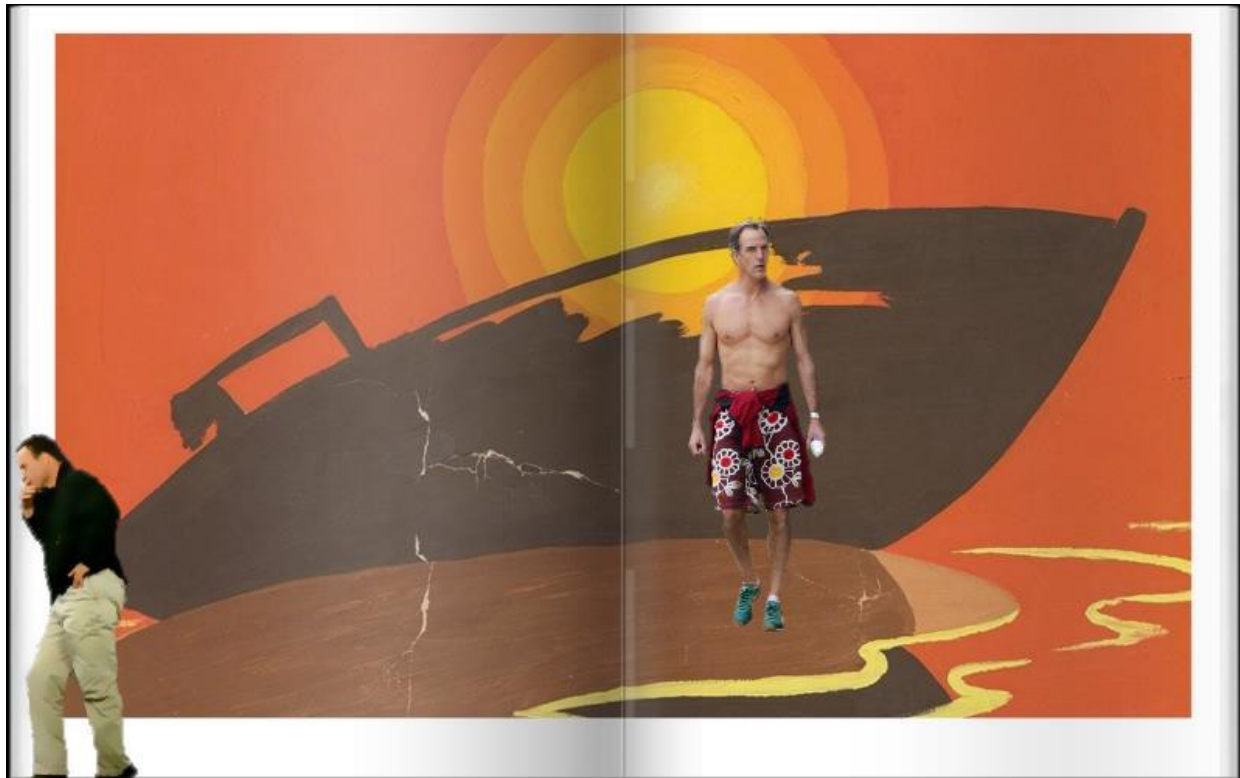
"Thanks for the chat. I'd be pleased if you came to the opening tomorrow – 7.30. So would Mom, I think. If you've got some smarter clothes, that would be good - no offence. It's all a little too sedate, in my view. We're all in tuxes, would you believe? Which is a laugh, considering Ellery was the biggest dope fiend you could find on the coast in that era. But I'd like you to come along, if you've time."

"I'd be pleased to."

"I'll put your name on the list."

Blair gave Simon a slight smile in farewell, and made his way out of the restaurant and across the plaza, heading back to the Museum. Simon watched him go with a heavy heart. Nothing about this situation was turning out to be easy, and meeting Blair had opened up even more wounds from the past.

He let his attention drift from Blair's figure to the busy street, full of evening promenaders. Sentinel senses be damned – a cop's senses looked for and easily spotted a familiar figure at a cafe table on the sidewalk opposite, a table positioned in the shadow of some trees. That same cop's senses noted how the man's gaze followed Sandburg as he walked away. Then Jim got up and disappeared into the gloaming.



3.

The surf was better the next day, particularly on State Beach. Yesterday's wind out to sea had helped produce a fine swell that rolled majestically into the bay and provided good sport for the many surfers dotted around the water at this early hour; already the sand was warm and the still air was growing rapidly hotter.

Blair made himself comfortable underneath a low wall, positioned so that he had a good view of the beach. The intelligence he had garnered locally was that State was a good place to start and he was ready to stick it out, because if there was one thing that life with Naomi Sandburg had taught him, by exception, it was that the good things were the things you had to work at.

By ten o'clock, it was seriously hot. Blair was beginning to doubt his conviction, when a figure emerged from behind a group of artfully abandoned fishing boats that were supposed to add, Blair guessed, some southern Californian authenticity to the scene. Blair smiled to himself: why hadn't he guessed that he would have been the observee rather than the observer in this situation? It would be classic Jim to have been watching him all this time. Feeling his own heart rate increase, and forcing himself to remain outwardly calm - though it

would hardly fool a Sentinel - he settled further into his sandy seat and watched Jim as he walked up the beach.

The guy was in great shape physically, no doubt about that. The choice of garish Bermuda shorts was less than typical, Blair thought, but he guessed they fitted in well with the beach life. He noted with a pang of nostalgia the confident stride and loose limbs that were Jim's trademark. Only as the man drew closer did he see the hooded eyes and tight lips, and Blair felt then an almost physical pain as memories of his last months in Cascade flooded back. This cold, aloof Jim was not the image he had held dear in these past years, but it was one that he now remembered all too well. It looked like this trip might not have been such a good idea after all.

Jim surprised him by coming to a dead stop some fifteen yards away. Blair took off his sunglasses and in the bright light took a long, hard look at his friend - former friend, he corrected himself. Now, Jim seemed almost hesitant, his eyes flicking between Sandburg's face and clothes and then back to the empty sand at Blair's feet.

"You've come this far..." said Blair with a faint smile of encouragement, and patted the sand next to him. Jim drew a little closer.

"Shouldn't you be in a Museum, or something? Working?"

Blair shaded his eyes and sent Jim a wry grin.

"Nah, playing hookey. Everything's done, anyway."

"Why are you here?"

"It's a public beach. I fancied getting some sun."

"You know what I mean."

"The planets were in alignment, maybe. Or you can call it an Act of God. Actually, I bumped into Simon Banks at the hotel."

Jim sighed heavily.

"Forgive me if I don't believe you. Our past history would indicate that this is no accident, Sandburg."

"Once upon a time," said Blair, leaning further back against the wall and closing his eyes for a moment, "our history indicated it was fate. It indicated that where one went, the other followed. Remember that, Jim?"

"That was a long time ago. Another universe. Nearly three years."

"Two years, ten months, eleven days. Not that I've been counting or anything."

Blair kept his eyes shut, his eyelids a red screen. A dark shadow passed in front of them and he heard a rustle of displaced sand as Jim sat down next to him. He did his best not to smile.

"So why now?"

"Truly, it's serendipity."

"Bullshit."

"Hey, the university was co-sponsoring the Watts retrospective and I volunteered to help. You think I knew you'd chosen Monterey as your new residence? After all, you've not spoken to me in..."

"...Two years, ten months and eleven days. You made your point."

There was a silence. Blair cracked open an eyelid and found Jim, cross-legged on the sand, staring at him.

"What?"

"You're looking good, Chief. Real good. The hair suits you."

"You're still hanging onto yours, I see. Congratulations. I wouldn't have put money on it. Why are you here?"

"Excuse me, I think that was my question."

"I'm borrowing it for a while. Why Monterey?"

"It was as good a place as any. The surf is good, it's warm, and nobody knows me here."

"And you know no one either, I'm guessing. No man is an island, Jim."

"The island known as Jim Ellison would beg to differ."

There was a pause.

"I heard about Culpepper," said Blair quietly, drawing shapes in the sand beside him. "Maybe six months after it happened."

"It made the press in Baltimore? I'm famous."

"Not much reporting, but I still have some spies in Cascade. I don't know everything about it, but I do know one thing. It wasn't your fault."

"You weren't there."

"I know you and I know damn well that you would have stopped it if you could have done. You couldn't help being taken down by all the noise and chaos. I'm guessing your senses were pretty much fully extended to hear the hostages when it all went to Hell in a hand basket?"

Jim shifted irritably.

"I don't need this rehashed, thank you."

"You telling me you don't rehash this over and over to yourself, pretty much every day? Like I said, I know you."

"Used to know me, Sandburg. I've dealt with it. I've moved on, like you should. It's a little late in the day to be offering support now, my friend. You're two years behind the curve. Two years and three months, since you like to be precise."

Blair's eyes started to burn a little - the sun was very bright, after all. He put his dark glasses on again. Jim stood up suddenly.

"Thanks for the pep talk, Chief. It really helped." Jim's voice was withering. "Let's do this again sometime."

He turned to go, and Blair's control shattered.

"I wanted to see you. There, that's the truth."

Jim paused and turned round, head cocked as if waiting for more. Blair carried on, the words coming fast now.

"I spun Simon a line about it being chance I was here with the exhibition, but I inveigled my way in because it was a connection with Monterey. I knew you were here. It took me a while to find out, but I still have people in the PD who'll talk to me. I've known you were here for a long time. I just haven't been able to get here."

Blair tore his sunglasses off his face again and dashed the back of his hand across his eyes. The sun was far too bright. He pushed down on the sand with his other hand, and struggled awkwardly to his feet so that he was standing in front of Jim, staring up at the man's impassive face. He pressed on; after all, the good things were the things you had to work at, weren't they?

"We parted wrong, Jim. We were in a mess and we parted before we could work it out."

"You left," said Jim, flatly.

"Yeah, I did. I ran away. I was sick with myself and ashamed and I couldn't bear to see your disappointment in me."

"Disappointment?" echoed Jim. Blair was still talking.

"I wasn't man enough to deal. I thought that leaving you behind was best for both of us. For a long time - months and months - I couldn't bring myself to call, to write - anything. Then... then something happened, and I knew I had to speak to you. I couldn't let the silence go on. And lo and behold, you'd disappeared. "

"Yeah? Well, pardon me, but Cascade was a less than comfortable place for me to be, hanging around for your phone calls. Not with the Press baying for my blood, because I was a chicken-shit coward, and my father handing me a cheque and telling me to get the hell out of Dodge before the family name was 'irreparably besmirched by my aberrant nature'." Jim's voice in the final few words switched to a passable imitation of William Ellison's.

Blair was jolted out of his confessional state.

"What? He did what? Your dad?" His eyes were wide with horror.

“Yeah. Seems my behaviour was likely to stymie my dear brother’s social aspirations. My father’s cursed with disappointing sons on both counts, it would appear, but he decided to go with the non-freak. I didn’t take the cheque, by the way.” Jim’s words were clipped, like someone striking granite chips off solid rock.

“Jesus, Jim! Oh, man, I don’t know what to say to you. How could he? Jesus, how could he?”

Blair instinctively put a hand out towards Jim, a gesture of comfort and sympathy, and a need to make contact with what he had so mistakenly cast away. But Jim moved back a step.

“Why didn’t you just tell them about the zones, Jim? Surely the Sentinel secret isn’t worth holding onto in the face of such... such... cruelty?” Blair was pleading now, unable to understand how the situation could have spiraled out of control so appallingly in such a short time, and he with no way of knowing, no way of helping. Because he’d been too goddamn cowardly to pick up the phone and face Jim’s rejection head-on.

“Par for the course with my family, don’t you think? Anyway, they weren’t the ones I was counting on...”

Blair’s mouth fell open.

“You never...” he began, desperately trying to find words to cope. “I never... you never gave me the impression you counted on me. Not afterwards; not after the Diss.”

Jim looked at him askance.

“Who said I did, Sandburg?” Blair felt the sand shift beneath him. He rallied for a final attempt, a last chance to get through.

“That’s why I couldn’t take the detective’s badge, Jim. Why I left Rainier, left Cascade. We were just tiptoeing round each other, barely communicating, for months. And as the time went on and there was no sign of light at the end of the tunnel – no sign at all – I couldn’t bear to stay.”

He gave a bitter laugh.

“You know, Simon last night asked me how it all ended. He meant you and me; us being friends, us being... together. So I told him, the first time I’ve put it into words for anyone else. I said ‘Jim never forgave me for betraying him, and I’ve never forgiven myself’.”

Jim turned his back, staring down the beach; Blair ploughed on.

“I let you down so badly, Jim. I tried to put it right, but it didn’t work. Giving up Rainier, denying the Sentinel thing – none of it worked. I knew you felt you couldn’t trust me again, I knew the writing was on the wall for our... our partnership, but I wasn’t brave enough to own up to the consequences. I could see how unhappy you were. I ran out before I caused any more trouble. I’m not proud of that. I’ve regretted that, and I’ve regretted leaving, for every one of those two years, ten months and eleven days since. I wanted to have the chance to tell you that, at least. And the more I find out about all those months, all those days, the

more I'm burning up with the shame, the *shame* of running away. If you want to see a real coward, Jim, he's right here."

There was a long silence. Blair was desperate for Jim to say something, anything. He felt flayed, waiting for Jim to turn around; flayed in the hot sun with the sounds of the sea and the seabirds calling all around. It was too idyllic a setting for this painful chance to speak in supplication. And Jim still stood there with his arms crossed, staring seawards, his face expressionless. At last he spoke.

"It was all a long time ago, Sandburg. Time to grow up. We aren't in first grade, there are no friends for life, for ever and ever, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die. What happened, happened. Just get over it. I have."

And with that Jim started to walk down the beach, but then suddenly wheeled back on Blair with such ferocity that it caught the other man unawares, and he took an involuntary step backwards.

"If you knew where I was, why's it taken you so long, huh? Just convenient now, is it, with a free trip to Monterey with your university friends, to take the time to drop by and unload a guilty conscience? If you felt like that, Chief, there's a Greyhound twice a week."

Blair dropped his head, and stared at his feet, his shoulders slumped.

"Yeah," muttered Jim to himself as he turned again. "Thought so."

The words came softly to him in his first few strides.

"Naomi's dead, Jim."

Jim stopped then, and turned, frowning with disbelief.

"What did you say?"

Blair put his dark glasses on again, and stooped to gather up his things.

"Mom's dead. It happened last month."

Jim walked back towards him. Blair searched his face and saw a fissure in the bleak facade that was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

"How?"

"Cancer; a succession of internal organs. I'll spare you the details, they weren't fun. It was diagnosed not long after I left Cascade, though I think she had some inkling, you know? She was keen to stay close to me when I got the post in Baltimore. Then it all went downhill quickly. She needed pretty much full-time nursing, what with the disease and the succession of chemo. The university were very good; they let me off some of my classes so I could be with her, and look after her."

Blair found his self-control fading again. He was now the one to turn away and stare at the sea.

"She fought so hard, you know? Well, that was just like her, right? She fought so hard and I couldn't leave her, not for a minute; not to come and see you, even though it's what I'd wanted to do for so long. I couldn't abandon *her*, as well. I started volunteering on the Watts retrospective, just a little bit of admin work, really. It was as much as I could do at the time, and she was so pleased about it – she'd been really fond of Ellery. But it wasn't just that for me. The fact that it was going to be in Monterey made it seem like I was getting close to you, though I never thought I'd actually get here. The project team were really nice about everything - they loved the fact that Ellery had been a friend of Mom's – and they insisted I come out here after Naomi passed. It was a godsend. I've not much spare cash right now, and they were looking for more helpers. So, yeah, I got a free trip out of it, but most of all I got to see you, and have a chance to talk to you, maybe clear the air finally. Maybe be friends again. That's what I thought; hoped. No harm in hoping, hey?"

He tailed off; there was no point in talking any more. What he had wanted to say had come out, more or less, and he realised now it had just been a pointless exercise in self-flagellation.

"I'm sorry, Chief. Real sorry."

Jim's voice was soft, close to his ear. He was standing at Blair's back, and Blair felt that, for that moment, if he had let himself fall backwards, then Jim would have caught him, kept him safe, just like all those years ago. Then the moment passed, and Jim was walking away again. He took a deep breath.

"I'm here till Monday. If... you know..." Blair paused for a moment. "Come to the opening tonight?"

Jim didn't reply, and with a sense of utter failure Blair watched him cross the sand and disappear again amongst the beach crowds.

4.

So Naomi was dead. Well, well.

Jim tried to say "good riddance" but he couldn't, not really. That was unfair. It hadn't been all Naomi's fault; the Dissertation had been a slow-burning fuse that she had just helped along its last few yards to the bomb that blew him and Sandburg to smithereens.

I couldn't bear to see your disappointment in me.

Funny, reflected Jim, how witnesses to that explosion– even the victims themselves - saw different things about how it happened. Just like the problems he used to face at work, when gathering eye-witness statements to any disaster; conflicting reports, confusing evidence, and individuals' complete conviction that what they remembered was the absolute truth.

Cops knew for a fact that the human memory was pretty faulty a lot of the time, and was easily coloured by all sorts of bias and predisposition, not to mention the stress of a traumatic situation. So why was he surprised to find his recollection of those past events were at odds with Blair's?

He looked down over the balcony and watched the milling crowd, elegantly dressed for the most part, though Simon Banks' sports jacket stood out garishly. The people below grouped and broke up and reformed into other groups; like bees in a hive, he thought – finding out from each other where the honey pots were. Except here, the sweet stuff was gossip and money.

That kind of life had never been for him. He was happy being an island; he was. It had been proved time and time again. Except...

Unerringly he picked out the foreshortened figure of Sandburg – foreshortened more than usual, thought Jim, trying out a joke; it didn't feel right. Blair was moving through the melee, introducing, being introduced, checking details with the catering staff, conferring quietly with other colleagues. Jim allowed his sight to be drawn in to the familiar figure, drinking in his presence, even though Sandburg had no idea he was there, and was way below in the Grand Gallery while Jim was way above.

I couldn't bear to see your disappointment in me.

Was that what he thought? Was that *really* what he thought? Blair, the man who had pulled him through the worst times and stood steady as a rock while Jim rode out his temper and his moods? The man who had come back for him, out of the jaws of death; the man who had self-immolated in front of the world's Press, just to keep Jim safe? Disappointed? Jesus, how could Blair think that?

Oh sure, those first weeks of hell and frustration as the secret got out, Jim had been angry. He had momentarily felt let down, it was true, but it had been a passing phase of selfishness and ingratitude, because he finally realised that the whole thing had been an accident waiting to happen. Blair had just got in the way. His presence had staved off Culpepper Mall for years, but that melt-down would have happened sooner or later. He couldn't blame Blair.

But he had blamed himself, bitterly. Disappointed was quite the wrong word. Try appalled. Yeah, appalled was a good word. Appalled at his own actions, filled with guilt at seeing how Sandburg wrecked his own career, and how the man was willing to bend himself into a new role quite at odds with his character and shortchanging his capabilities, just to suit Jim. The same Jim who stood to one side and stayed silent with the open-mouthed horror of a witness to a car-crash. No wonder Blair had felt uncertain, insecure; no wonder the call of academia had given him a convenient way out. But Blair Sandburg a coward? No, it wasn't him. The Cascade press after Culpepper had hit the nail on the head, all right.

"...as the time went on and there was no sign of light at the end of the tunnel – no sign at all..."

And there had been Jim, persuading himself that he was selflessly stepping back and giving the man some space, because if Sandburg didn't want to talk about things, then that surely meant that Sandburg was good with it all; everything sorted, let's go on as before. And thank God, because the last thing Jim had wanted to do was voice his own insecurities.

Except that Sandburg had been choking on his own misplaced guilt, unable to get out the words, and Jim was apparently sailing along as if nothing had happened; staying clear, turning not just the other cheek, but his back.

A man with a tray appeared at his side, offering him some canapés, speaking to him insistently, and regarding him a little quizzically. Well, maybe Jim didn't look entirely in place at the Museum. He was more casual in his attire than even Simon Banks. Maybe the guy thought he was an interloper? Yeah, that was a good word for Jim Ellison; an interloper in the house of humanity.

He declined the canapés with a brief shake of his head, and threw the guy a sop.

"No one told me the dress-code," he said conspiratorially, pointing down at his chinos. The guy grinned and departed, and Jim returned to his watch. Sandburg was now in joking conversation with a couple of very attractive young women; prime Blair territory. Yet, the vivacity was all on the side of the girls. It was like the day before when, after Simon's phone message, he had tailed Blair and observed him in the last hours of set-up at the Museum – it had been easy to sneak in with the temporary catering staff and secrete himself on this very same balcony. Blair had been active and engaged with his work, and he had had the admiring attention of a number of young women, both from the university team and the Museum staff – and a couple of boys too, Jim had noticed. But Blair's reactions had been just the same; polite, courteous, friendly, but... switched off, somehow. Smiling face and sad eyes, just like at the beach.

Oh, they were both walking wounded, he and Blair. In his self-absorption, Jim had been quick to class Blair's eventual departure as just another example of how people couldn't be trusted, and had been equally quick to lump Blair with everyone else's abandonment of him after Culpepper. And yet, had Jim ever thought to contact the other man? Had he given one moment to wondering whether Blair himself was all right?

Still gazing down at the Museum gathering, Jim's lip curled in inner contempt for himself and his actions, his self-deception and lies.

Happy on his own? Oh sure, he was. Jim Ellison's body had been wallowing in the wide Pacific Ocean every day for the past two and a half years, while his heart had been drowning in an even wider ocean of bitterness. Jesus, what a mess.

And here below him was the human race, with all its pettiness and foibles and affections and loyalties; Jim Ellison didn't belong in it.

Suddenly, unable to take any more of the sight of Blair and Simon, and of his past colliding with his future, he wheeled away from the balustrade and slipped down the service staircase and out through the kitchens, the way he had arrived.



“Simon! How do you like the show?”

Simon turned to see Blair, preternaturally tidy in a neat tux, with what was left of his hair scraped back and out of the way, making his way over with a couple of champagne flutes in his hands. Simon grinned and took one, tipping it in a toast.

“Here’s to you, Sandburg. It’s good to see you again, truly it is. And I’m glad to see you doing something that you like.”

A shadow crossed Blair’s polite smile then, and Simon wondered what he had managed to say wrong, yet again. But the shadow was quickly gone, and Blair tipped his glass back at Simon.

“How do you like the paintings?”

Simon turned to indicate a huge canvas just behind him. It was truly gigantic, stretching almost from floor to ceiling and halfway across the gallery wall. Blue trees stood in a blue landscape, a row of poplars bending slightly towards a terracotta horizon under a primrose-yellow sky. His first thought had been: “well, I wouldn’t give *that* house room,” but his attention had returned to it again and again.

“They’re a bit weird for my taste, to be honest. But there’s something about them - these trees, for instance. They just drill themselves into your head, like they’re hypnotic. You know me, Sandburg. I know nothing about art. But I can see why these pictures have such a following. They kind of get under your skin.”

Blair nodded appreciatively.

“Yeah, they do that. And as for weird, remember Ellery was out of his head for most of the time he was painting these. If you sense an altered state, think ‘marijuana.’” He grinned, and Simon grinned happily back; it was almost like old times.

“You saw Jim,” he ventured, knowing that he could be saying the wrong thing again, but having to try nonetheless. Blair’s face darkened.

“Yeah, we spoke. I thought it might be a chance to clear up some... ah ... misunderstandings between us. Make some explanations, maybe. But he wasn’t that receptive. I have to confess, Simon, we didn’t really talk about the job.”

“It’s heart-breaking,..” began Simon, and Blair suddenly tipped his head back and swallowed the contents of the champagne flute in one.

“Sorry, man, gotta keep doing the rounds. See you later.” The voice was flat and dull. He turned to go and Simon tried to put out a hand to stop him, only to be diverted by a sudden trilling from his pocket. People nearby looked at him disparagingly as he extricated his shrill cellphone from his pants pocket and moved hurriedly to the relative security of a sculpture made from bits of driftwood and tin cans.

“Captain, it’s Taggart.”

Joel’s voice came through a little distorted.

“Joel, hey, you’ll never guess who I’ve just been speaking to...”

“Sorry, Simon, tell me later. I’m in the car right now, driving back from the State facility where they’d been holding Dawson Quinn before he was transferred. Thought I ought to check up on a few things”.

“What’re you talking about?” Simon felt a worm of disquiet start to burrow into his brain.

“I’ve talked to some of his former cellmates. Seems he was obsessed with Major Crimes, and getting his own back on us, and in particular Jim Ellison. The last guy he was sharing with said he knew that Ellison had moved to Monterey – there are a number of crooked cops in there who have their own axe to grind with Major Crimes, so it would have been easy for him to take advantage of gossip.”

Simon scanned the crowd for Blair and, catching his eye, beckoned furiously to him. He saw Blair give a start and then hurriedly extricate himself from the group he was in, and come over. Simon realized that his own expression must be giving away some of his disquiet.

Joel was still talking.

“But here’s the kicker, Simon. The parole board decided, in their wisdom, that Quinn was okay to be transferred to a low security facility – something about Quinn’s evident remorse for his actions. Can you believe it? Anyway, then Quinn persuaded them that he should be placed in Southern California. He said he had family there, and God knows his rapsheet for his early years includes enough stuff he’s pulled in California as well as Oregon and here

with us, so somehow they gave approval. Now he's skipped, and that means he's in your area. Ten to one he's making a beeline for Monterey and Ellison."

Simon had been holding the phone so that Blair could listen in. He saw the other man's worried expression.

"Joel," he said, pulling the phone back to his own ear, "keep me posted, and tell Captain Swann at the Monterey PD, would you?"

"I already have a call out."

Simon rang off and immediately hit another number. He looked at Blair.

"It may be nothing..." he began. Blair's voice was sharp.

"It's Quinn, Simon! You remember what he said after the trial – he'll be going after Jim. Hell, even I could find Jim after all this time. Yeah, I lied to you, so sue me. But if I could do it, so could Quinn. More easily, in fact. He'd have known people on the inside who would be only too pleased to help."

Simon closed the phone in exasperation.

"He's switched off, not even a messaging service."

"Or Quinn's already got to him."

They stared at each other in mute anxiety, then Simon shook himself.

"I have an address..."

"Then let's go!"

The crowds parted in consternation as the two men ran for the side doors leading to the parking lot beyond. They had reached the asphalt and Simon was pulling out his keys when the night exploded.

There was a flash and the immediate report of a revolver, and Blair went down with a grunt, his head jerking backwards and his body knocked off balance. Simon felt the blood hit him. He grabbed for a gun that wasn't there, turning towards the shooter. It was Quinn - of course it was Quinn; tall, rangy, shaven head, with the wild eyes of a madman. Dimly he heard people screaming and shouting. And Quinn's gun went off again.

Simon kept running, but the running got him nowhere. He saw the ground getting closer and still he ran, until he hit asphalt. Something was wrong with his arms, but he struggled up to his knees, only to see Quinn towering over him, the gun pointing at Simon's head.

"Wa-all..." drawled Quinn, showing his teeth, "seems to me a live one's worth more'n a dead one. 'Specially when it's my old friend, El Capitano Banks. Looks like I'm gonna get you three sonsabitches all at once. Now, I call that efficient."

He struck down with the butt of the revolver, and Simon's world went black.

5.

Dawn on Sunday; another day. Jesus, how was it they kept on coming with such relentless regularity?

Jim unraveled himself from his truck and stepped out in the brisk chill of the summer morning. The sun was just touching the water, peeking up over the land to the east. It was an oddity of geography that meant you could stand at Lover's Point and face the rising sun over the sea, and there were a fair number of leisure photographers in the parking lot who had risen early to catch the phenomenon. But Jim had parked the previous night in the furthest reaches of the lot, and was well away from their interference.

What had Blair said?

'You telling me you don't rehash this over and over to yourself, pretty much every day?'

Spot on, as always, Chief. So much for complete detachment, for moving on and forgetting the past. Every day Jim had relived those terrible months, from Zeller to Culpepper and beyond. There had been plenty of nights, too, when the introspection had been overwhelming and his brain would refuse to shut up, and he'd come out with his thoughts to Lover's Point to wait out the darkness and eventually see another sunrise. It was one way of checking he was still alive, still on the planet. This last night, he had needed the refuge of the beach more than ever.

It was too late to start over, wasn't it? Far too late, surely? Far too much bitterness and unhappiness poisoning the possibility. But the thought of letting this chance go...

A long time ago, Jim had viciously attacked Blair for suggesting Jim had 'fear-based responses'. But deep down, Jim had known how much fear ruled his life, how frightened he was of all this... this *feeling*. Give him a tall building to leap, and he was your man. There was security in the rush of adrenaline, and the chance of escaping the world in the mortal danger it presented. But nothing was as terrifying as dealing with the emotions that surged within him and refused to be ignored.

He'd done the betraying; he was the coward, unable to admit his flaws to those who meant the most to him. And he felt frozen in indecision, in fear; had he waited so long to make a move that now he was a man of stone, incapable of that movement?

It was cold in the breeze, but he barely noticed. He sat on the coping of the parking lot, letting his sight drift away with the breakers, and his hearing loop endlessly on the constant surge of water. He had become adept at these mini-zones, a way of removing his consciousness when things became too unbearable, but still retaining enough cognisance to be able to snap back into the world when he needed.

This time, he didn't bring himself back; instead, there was a long-forgotten trigger. He shook himself awake and turned to see a new car coming into the parking area, a Monterey PD patrol car with its headlights blazing and a blue light flashing on its roof. There was something surreal about its almost silent approach – no siren – against the serene backdrop of a sea sunrise. It wasn't the car itself, but the passenger that had been the familiar prompt.

In that moment, something awakened within him; a rush of fear, painful in its intensity. When the car stopped and he saw Blair get shakily out, his face pale, part of his scalp shaved and an ugly wound along his skull, the reason was clear.

“What the hell happened, Chief?”

“Quinn, Dawson Quinn. Remember him? He got out of jail and he’s tracked you down. Except he got to me and Simon first.” Blair’s voice sounded heavy with anger and anxiety.

All thoughts of keeping his distance disappeared. Jim walked forward, taking hold of Blair by his upper arms and staring intently at his face.

“Are you okay?” - then the sudden realisation – “Jesus, Blair, you’ve been shot in the head!” A hand that had been gripping a bloodstained tux reached up to hover over the wound. “You should be in a hospital!”

“That’s what we keep telling him,” muttered the young patrolman who had been driving. Blair frowned, shaking his head impatiently.

“No time, no time.” Blair shook himself free of Jim’s grasp. “Quinn must have thought he’d killed me, that’s why he left me, I guess. But he took Simon. It happened at the Museum. We’d just heard that there was a real good chance that Quinn was coming after you, and we were off to find you when... well, I don’t remember too much about it, but people there said that Quinn shot Simon as well, then dragged him into a car and made off.”

Jim’s eyes widened in horror.

“When was this?”

“About 10.30 last night. Maybe Quinn had known Simon would be there, maybe he just figured that you would be, because... well, because of me. Maybe he just got lucky. Anyway, Simon’s out there somewhere, hurt, and with that psycho.”

The patrolman spoke up.

“I’m to bring you in, Mr Ellison. Get you under police protection until all this blows over. Orders from Captain Swann.”

“Bullshit,” snapped Jim. “I need to be with the pursuit team. I know Quinn of old. I can help.”

“Sorry, sir, but you have no jurisdiction here. And Captain Swann says, well, you aren’t a cop anymore.”

Jim looked back at Blair.

“They took me to the hospital,” said Blair, answering Jim’s unasked questions, “but when I woke up, I managed to persuade Swann to let me go in a patrol car. They’d had other cars out looking for you tonight – I mean, last night - but they couldn’t find you. I told Swann I’d know where you were.” He made a rueful face. “I lied, but hey, it was a good guess.”

He pulled close to Jim, speaking softly.

“They don’t know where to look for Quinn, Jim. They’re running round like headless chickens.

You have to be there.”

Jim regarded him gravely.

“First of all, you need to be back in a hospital.”

“You can come with me, sir,” offered the patrolman, still pushing his own agenda and gesturing towards his car. Jim shook his head.

“I’ve got my truck. I’ll follow you.”

Blair snorted in exasperation.

“Officer Spence, you need to tell Jim what happened at the gas station. I was still out for the count at the hospital.”

Spence cleared his throat.

“Well, about 11.30 last night, Quinn held up a gas station in Carmel. He took camping equipment and water and some food – not much, though. Thank God he didn’t kill anyone there, but he said to the guy on the counter that he was going hunting wolves. And to tell you that, Mr Ellison.”

Blair shook Jim’s arm.

“What do you think, Jim? Any ideas?”

Jim shook his head, frowning.

“Captain Swann thinks he’ll go into the hills, into the wild,” offered Spence. “That’s kind of his MO, right?”

“What exactly did Quinn say?” asked Jim, his mind turning now, the old reflexes coming back on line - sluggishly, but nevertheless back in action.

“Ah, he said: ‘tell Ellison I’m a-huntin’. I’m with the wolves and I’ll be a-huntin’ him down.’ ” Spence sounded slightly embarrassed at the melodrama of the words. “That’s what the gas station manager said. Captain Swann kept making him repeat it, and I was standing right by them.”

“With the wolves, with the wolves...” muttered Jim, feeling something trying to fall into place.

“What is it, Jim?” Blair was close to his side again, his voice firm, strong, encouraging. Jim’s head snapped up.

“He’s not going to be in the hills. It’s Point Lobos – you know, Wolf Point. It’s less than 30 minutes down the coast from here.”

“What, the wildlife refuge? Why there, Jim?” Blair looked doubtful.

“Well, yeah, Mr Ellison, like Blair says, why there? That’s a dead end. Nowhere to go but the ocean.”

Jim ignored Spence, and looked intently at Blair.

“Here’s my take on this, Chief. Quinn’s a man with a mission. He’s had nothing to do for the past six or seven years but obsess about getting revenge on Major Crimes, and me especially, it would seem. Because we have that back history; because I got him last time and I damned near killed him last time. You know that. It’s only Simon who stopped me. It’s like unfinished business for him. Quinn’s thought about this so long that now it’s the only thing he wants to do, and to hell with the consequences. Believe me, I know how that kind of thinking can twist your brain, make you think there’s no other possibility. You hear me, Chief? You understand what I’m saying?”

Blair stared at him, and Jim thought he saw in those wide eyes some dawning comprehension of what he was trying to convey; that the words were not just about Quinn.

“So we go to Point Lobos,” said Blair firmly, after a moment.

“Oh no, Chief, you go to a hospital. Spence can take you. I’ll go to meet Quinn. It’s what he wants.”

“Like hell, Jim!”

“Ah, well now, Mr Ellison, actually you’ve got to come with me. You’ve got no sanction for going off to Point Lobos. I can tell Cap’n Swann what you think, but you gotta leave it to us cops, sir. We know what we’re doing.”

Jim shook his head impatiently.

“You’ve got it wrong, I tell you.”

Blair pulled him roughly closer.

“Jim, don’t you dare go off on your own! You’ve got no weapons, no back up. Quinn’s got at least one gun. It’s not just your past with Quinn that’s the issue here. It’s Simon! Screw this up and you endanger not just yourself, but your friend!”

Jim looked down at him, noting the paleness, the dark slash of the wound still oozing a little, and the burning fire in his eyes. *Ah, god*, he thought. *How I’ve missed that fire.*

“Chief,” he said quietly, putting a little resignation into his voice, “you’ve got a point. Okay, I concede.” He tried a smile. Strange how the first time he’d smiled at Sandburg in nearly three years was when he was trying a little obfuscation. He turned to Spence.

“Officer, you take your patrol car and I’ll follow you in, okay? Chief, you want to ride with Spence?”

Blair gave him another doubtful look. *Huh*, thought Jim, *you still read me so well, Chief.* Then he nodded and, with an arched eyebrow aimed at Jim, turned to Spence again.

“I’ll ride with Jim, okay?”

Jim chuckled quietly, and ushered him into the truck.

“Lead the way, Spence, would you?” He called out as he climbed in himself. “I really think we need to get Blair to a hospital.”

Spence waved in response, and the patrol car started rolling back along the track. Jim could see the young man talking into his radio mic, presumably reporting to Swann that he'd rounded up the ex-cop. Huh.

He started up the truck and began to follow the patrol car gently out of the parking lot. The sun was fully above the sea now, and the other visitors were staring openly at the little procession rather than concentrating on their sight-seeing. Jim flipped them a sarcastic little wave, and felt Blair's eyes on him. He turned his head and saw a familiar, much-missed expression of exasperation and amusement.

“Just like old times, eh, Chief?” said Jim, his smile now hard and feral. Blair merely snorted.

The patrol car hit the hard top of Ocean Boulevard and Jim followed it sedately until Lighthouse Avenue. Then Jim twisted the wheel to the right, and the truck went speeding off down Forest towards Point Lobos, and Quinn.

6.

By the time they got off the Coast Highway at the entrance to the State Refuge, the breeze had increased, and was whipping the sea into little peaks of white. Choppy waves were hitting the gnarled rocks of the headland, sending up small spurts of spray and foam. It felt cold, even in the truck, and Jim saw Blair draw his thin jacket around himself further.

“Point Lobos,” muttered Blair, as if speaking to himself. “Point of the Sea Wolves, named after the barking sealions...” Then he looked at Jim with a rueful smirk. “Not my wolf, though. You still see yours?”

“Not for two years, ten months and ... well, twelve days, now,” replied Jim keeping his voice light. The disappearance of his spirit jaguar had been an unexpected source of grief for him, even amongst all the other hardships. He reached into the back and pulled a heavy leather jacket out of the tumbled belongings there, tossing it into Blair's lap.

“Put it on, Chief.”

Blair gave him an unreadable look and shrugged it on over his black jacket. It stopped the shivering, but Jim was also pleased that he no longer had to see the bloodstains.

He pulled the truck onto the main circular drive - a grit road that took visitors out to the furthest rocks. No one else was around, it still being very early. After a few hundred yards he stopped the truck and slipped out to crouch over the gravel for a moment. Looking up again, he saw Blair craning his neck to see what was going on.

“There's some oil been dripped along this track,” he said, answering Blair's questioning look. “Very fresh.”

“Could be anyone,” said Blair truculently.

“I’m banking on Quinn rather than a visitor at this hour,” Jim replied mildly. He stood up and scanned the road ahead.

“I’m going to have a look beyond that outcrop. You stay here.”

Blair was silent, but as he walked away, Jim heard the muttered: “Yeah, just like old times. You asshole.”

Jim found his lips quirking into another smile, but he dampened the sensation down quickly.

From the outcrop he could scan most of the deeply indented coastline that made up Point Lobos State Park. As far as he could see, there were no cars at the overlooks or in the designated parking places, and there were no lone hikers or wildlife watchers in the fresh morning air. Far out, anchored in the kelp, sea otters were bobbing and swaying; most of them were dozing, but a few were carrying out their morning ablutions, grooming their fur with customary energy.

And no Quinn. Jim ranged his sight out as far as possible, raking every nook and cranny of the rocks, but he could see neither car nor humans. Yet where had the oil come from?

The sea otters were watching something.

That group off the furthest point – the rocks above Pinnacle Cove, if he remembered correctly – were looking up from their kelpy mattresses, heads turned towards the rocks, ears bearing; their characteristic look of surprise and concern was heightened by their alert postures. Jim pushed his sight out as far as he dared without zoning, looking for anything that might indicate the presence of other people.

The bumpy track to the inlet was a trail rather than a road and, to his recollection, certainly not one that public vehicles were allowed to use. But he could make out tyre tracks, and the smudge of rubber against some of the more prominent boulders. His gaze followed the line of tracks; there, just at the tip of the rocky promontory was a flutter of fabric, and the barest flicker of movement.

He pushed off the outcrop, and made his way quickly back to the truck at a crouching run. Blair was standing outside the vehicle, making his own survey of the seashore with Jim’s binoculars, which he must have remembered would be in the glove box.

“Look at the far point.” He turned Blair’s shoulders so he was directed just so. To his surprise, this time, Blair didn’t shrug away. “That’s Pinnacle Cove out there. I can see something. It might be illicit anglers, but my gut tells me no.”

Blair tossed the binoculars on the passenger seat of the truck.

“Can’t see with these. So, what’s the plan?”

“We’ll take the truck as far as we can safely make it towards Pinnacle, then I’ll go on foot. I’ll wheel round the back of him, from Big Dome” – Jim pointed towards another promontory to the north – “and then into Cypress Cove, and take him by surprise.”

“Using what, exactly? Your charisma and your steely glare?”

“Very funny, Chief. I was thinking, the tyre iron, maybe.”

“You’ve no gun?”

“I gave up carrying a gun a long time ago. Didn’t seem right, somehow.”

Jim turned to get back into the truck, but Blair grabbed his arm.

“Well, Quinn *has* got a gun, Jim. We should just call this in and wait for the cavalry.”

Jim shook his head.

“You said it yourself, Chief. Simon’s out there, hurt, and with that psycho. I don’t think any further delay is a good idea.”

He climbed into the truck. Blair gave a gusty sigh and jumped in as well, closing the door as the truck was moving off.

“Don’t get yourself killed, you sonofabitch,” he muttered. Jim didn’t reply; neither flippancy nor sentiment would help just then.

“Just don’t, okay?”

Blair crouched behind a strip of boulders marking the trail out to Pinnacle and trained the binoculars once again. He was somewhat higher now in this new position and viewing the rocks was easier. And this close in, he could easily make out the prone figure that was Simon Banks stretched out in a hollow in the rocks, and the gaunt shape of Quinn, sometimes crouching, sometimes standing to survey the coastline, clearly expecting someone to be coming for him.

Jim Ellison.

But Blair had other plans. As soon as Jim had slipped away from the truck, he had retrieved Jim’s cell-phone from the jumble of stuff on the backseat and got through to Swann, briefing him on their position. Less than thirty minutes, thought Blair, anxiously; less than thirty minutes for back-up to arrive. And it would take Jim a good twenty to make his furtive way around the headlands.

For God’s sake, Jim, don’t push things too hard!

He kept himself focused on the scene in front of him, watching for any movement from Quinn. It was not the time to think about the man who was inching his way along the rocks for a possibly bloody encounter with an old enemy, but his mind kept going there anyway. This kind of situation brought out the best and the worst in Jim, he reflected. Blair’s complete and perfect hero – no man he had ever met matched Jim’s instinctive need to help his fellows, and happily risk his own life in doing so. And no man he had met would be so damned foolhardy about doing it, either.

But the man out there now - surely he was different from the empty shell Blair had tracked down to State Beach? Surely now there was a flicker of life on that cold face, something Blair could latch onto, to draw his friend back from wherever he had exiled his soul for all these years? Blair knew that needed to happen, as much for himself as for Jim; things had waited so long to be put right. But the here and now was potentially fatal, and to more than just his hopes. Both Quinn and the past were their enemies, but only Quinn could blow the future all to pieces in a matter of seconds.

Please, God, thought Blair, praying to something he didn't believe in - but, hey, any old port in a storm - *Please, God, let me get him out of this. Don't make me leave Monterey without him.*

He was shaken out of his thoughts. Quinn was moving in agitation now, striding about the rocks and waving his gun around. His impatience was evident; things were taking too long. He stood over Simon Banks and kicked at his prone body. Blair flinched at the violence, and then flinched again as Quinn, clearly now shouting at Simon, brought his gun down again and again on Simon's shoulders and head.

This wasn't in the plan, thought Blair. *Something has to happen.*

He glanced quickly back over his shoulder to see if patrol cars were arriving - they were not. So he took several deep breaths and then ran out of the shelter of the rocks towards the headland, waving his arms and yelling wildly.

Jim could hear what was happening to Simon, but as yet he couldn't see. The circuitous trek around the far headland to come up on Quinn's blind side had taken even longer than he'd anticipated. And he was still too far off; if he closed on Quinn right now, it might take the man's attention off Simon momentarily, but Jim himself would be a sitting duck, exposed on top of the rocky promontory.

Yet Quinn needed to be stopped. Whereas Jim Ellison's internal madness could still be kept bottled up and in the depths, Quinn's own psychotic version was now out in the open, fizzing with violence and hate. He was taking his frustration out on Simon Banks, who remained unmoving on the rocks, clearly badly injured.

Gripping the tyre iron with his left hand, Jim hefted the fist-sized rock he had picked up in his approach - still too far to throw it with any effect. What he needed was a distraction, and the Monterey cops weren't turning up as he'd expected, given Sandburg was bound to have called them the second he was left alone.

Then suddenly, shouting. Quinn snapped upright, the target of his violence forgotten for the moment. His back was turned as he scanned the upper shoreline and Jim made vital yards over the rock before he had to drop down again. The hiss of the sea and the buffeting breeze covered any sound he was making, but he knew he had to keep out of sight if he wanted to avoid a bullet.

But the shouting - dear God, it was Sandburg! Jim peered out over the rocks to see Quinn level his gun and fire.

“Goddammit, you fuckin’ little bastard! Do I have to shoot ya three times to kill ya?” The distant shouting started up again, and Quinn responded with a volley of shots.

For crissakes, Blair! What the hell are you thinking of, you idiot?

But it was just what he would do, wasn’t it? Blair Sandburg, brave as a lion. This was the distraction; Blair could see what was happening, and was giving Jim the distraction he needed.

With a roar, Jim erupted from his hiding place, lined up on Quinn and threw his rock with all his strength and acuity. He was already running fast across the headland when it struck Quinn hard on his right shoulder, throwing him off-balance. He stumbled, and the gun went clattering across the rocks.

Quinn turned about and, as Jim crossed the final yards, whipped a knife out of his belt. But Jim launched himself off the ground to fly at his opponent, knocking his knife arm wide and bringing them both down on the hard boulders. The impact should have been enough to wind Quinn, but the man kept writhing, bringing the knife back towards Jim’s neck.

Jim grabbed hold of Quinn’s wrist with both hands to ward off the blow, but that allowed Quinn to grab at Jim’s eyes with his free hand. Jim flinched back, and they started tumbling again, and Jim found himself on his back with Quinn poised over him, the knife glittering in the bright sunlight.

For Jim, everything in that second stood out with extraordinary clarity; the sweat on Quinn’s forehead, the saliva glistening at the corner of the man’s mouth, the bloodshot eyes. And with it came the conviction that his habitual luck in cheating death in moments like these was about to run out.

But he wasn’t ready to make his escape from the world like this. He surged up, pushing hard against the other man to get him off balance. And still Quinn laughed – a high-pitched cackle - holding him down with the strength of a madman with nothing left to lose, and a glittering blade ready to strike. Jim gathered everything he had for a final effort.

A shot rang out, and a bullet splintered the rock near his side.

“Quinn! Let him go!”

Blair was standing on the boulders, not twenty yards away, with the discarded gun raised and trained on Quinn.

“I’ll shoot you if I have to. Throw away the knife!”

Quinn looked from Blair down to Jim again, and his face split into a manic grin.

“You don’t want me to do that, now do you, Ellison? There’s nothing left for you and me. It’s a fittin’ end for us both.”

“Quinn!” shouted Blair, and the man fell forward in a shower of blood, the knife dropping harmlessly to the rock beneath him with a metallic clang. Jim pushed the slumped body away, and scrambled backwards, still half-lying on the rock. He could feel his heart pounding with shock.

He looked at Blair, but Blair had turned and was looking back towards the trailhead, where a line of black-and-whites stood, blue lights flashing, and the morning sun was glinting off a sniper's rifle.

7.

Jim watched the paramedics load Simon onto a gurney. No one was saying too much about his condition; there had been a lot of blood-loss in the first place and Quinn's frenzied attacks had made matters worse. But he was still breathing, and had swum back into consciousness enough to briefly clasp Jim's hand earlier. Now Jim stood to one side as the casualty was evacuated, and Quinn was packed into a body-bag.

Blair had been crouching next to Simon for some time, brushing off the paramedics' attempts to check his own head injuries. But he now limped over to Jim – he'd fallen heavily in the rush to get to Quinn's gun before it was too late – and stood by his side.

"I would have taken him, you know. Next shot. I would have taken him." He was staring straight ahead at the body-bag.

"I'm glad you didn't have to."

Blair turned to him then.

"I'm riding back with Simon. Come with me?"

"No," said Jim without thinking. "I'll take the truck back."

"Come to the hospital?"

"Maybe later." Jim turned to go, only to find himself wheeled round, deep blue eyes regarding him with real fury.

"What the hell is this? He's your friend! You just saved his life, but you aren't interested enough to see him in hospital?"

Jim shook himself free

"I didn't save him," he said, his voice low. "I was out of my depth. I could never have got there without you, and even then I couldn't take him. That guy Spence was right. I'm not a cop, I've not been a cop for years. Don't try to revive the past, Chief. It's left us way behind."

Blair grabbed his arm again.

"I'm not buying that, and I've had enough of your self-pity." Blair's voice was equally low, but was full of pent-up anger. "You get your act together, Detective, you hear me?" Blair shook Jim. "If you've spent the last two years convincing yourself that those assholes in Cascade were right, then you're a damn fool. A bigger fool than even I thought you were. "

He dragged Jim's arm down so that Jim had to stoop towards him, and whispered furiously in his ear.

“You are a fine detective. You always were, and what happened in Cascade was a travesty. But more than a cop, you're a fine man, and a man with people who care deeply about him. Deeply, do you hear me?”

Jim tried to pull away, but Blair's grip was like a vice.

“And I think you still care about them. No, I *know* you do. Wake up, Jim! Don't let this go on any longer! We both deserve better!”

Then he pulled away sharply, and limped hurriedly back towards the gurney, passing Swann who was now approaching. He waved away some comment that Swann made, and Jim saw him disappear down the rocks with the ambulance crew.

“Fine work, Mr Ellison,” said Swann as he came up. “I'm sorry we've not had a chance to talk properly until now. I can't say I'm completely happy you and Mr Sandburg endangered yourselves like that, but I'm very grateful for your assistance. When we've got back to town and maybe all had some rest and a good meal, I'd be pleased if you would come to the PD and give us a statement. Just for the records.”

Jim nodded.

“Sure. Whatever.”

“You're taking your truck back yourself, I hear. Sure you're okay to do that?”

“I'm sure.”

Jim turned his head to the sea, but he could tell Swann was considering him. Eventually, the man spoke again.

“We took the head-shot because of the severity of the situation. We couldn't tell from back there whether Quinn had the upper hand, but it sure looked like it. There was no telling what he would do, as far as we were concerned. Plus the head-shot was the furthest away from you that we could hit him. I take full responsibility for that decision.”

“Yeah.”

“Mr Sandburg tells me he shouted a warning, but in any case I think we're procedurally okay. And frankly, my conscience isn't going to lose too much sleep over removing someone like Quinn from this Earth.”

“No.”

Swann started to move off to join his team, but then stopped and turned again.

“Will you be staying in Monterey, do you think?”

“Why?” retorted Jim. “You need me to leave town?”

Swann chuckled.

“Oh no, Mr Ellison, nothing like that. I was just thinking - if ever you wanted to take up with the police again, career-wise, our team would welcome you on board. I know your record –

all of it –and I’d be proud to have you as a colleague. Now, you sure you don’t need a lift back to town?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Okay, go get some rest, and I’ll see you later.”

Jim watched him go back across the rocks, and then he watched the little procession making its way up to the trailhead to where the patrol cars and ambulances were waiting. And then he watched as they drove away, one by one, the first ambulance followed closely by two cars, all with their lights flashing in urgency. Finally he was alone in the bright sun, with the cries of the gulls and the distant bark of sealions, and yet he still felt on the outside of everything - no part of the world.

He turned towards the sea and walked to the end of the rocks, avoiding the patch of Quinn’s blood. The wind was cold, and he was glad, because that could purify him; the cold of the wind and the gnarled boulders, the cold of the ocean. It could wash away all the pain and the sadness and the loss.

He had lost his old life, and he had lost his friends. But worst of all, he had lost Blair Sandburg. And only now did he allow himself to feel the enormity of that loss; it brought him to his knees on the hard stone.

So he clawed at the rocks till his hands tore and he felt the rasp of stone fragments mingling with his blood, and he lay on those same rocks and watched sand particles blowing against the minute plants which clung on to life on the edge of the world. He rolled onto his back and felt the world come closer.

And this time, instead of closing off and pushing it all away, he allowed himself to feel the chill of the breeze, and his own reflexive shivering. He tipped his face up to the sky and watched the bright white gulls wheeling in the flawless high blue, and he heard the rush of the water as it wove itself around the kelp fronds, and the little splashes and sighs of the sea otters as they relaxed again into their routine.

And he found he was crying.

The hospital ward was dimly lit. On either side of a central corridor, quiet rooms held single patients in intensive care, and a glass panel by each doorway allowed visitors to observe their progress. Blair had been observing Simon’s progress since the man had been brought in, and he watched with intense concentration the lights and monitors that tracked Simon’s strengthening condition. It was a matter of time for healing, that was all.

At some point, Blair knew, he would need to get on the phone to Cascade and brief Joel and the others, but not just then. He was bone-weary, and if the window hadn’t been there to support him, he thought he might well fall over. But even more than the physical fatigue, and the depressive slump after the adrenaline rush of Point Lobos, his last words with Jim were weighing down on his heart like a ton of rubble. So heavy was it, he wondered whether he would ever walk upright again.

Lost in his numbness, he didn't hear quiet footsteps approaching, and started when he saw Jim at his side. He looked from Jim's solemn face to Simon's quiet form on the bed, and then back to Jim.

"*Déjà vu* all over again," he said with a wry smile.

"Huh?"

"I seem to remember being in a place like this before, with Simon in a hospital bed."

"Oh, yeah. Not my finest hour."

"Not for either of us."

Jim peered through the window.

"How is he?"

Blair pushed himself off the glass and finally slumped into a chair.

"Strengthening. Transfusions are doing well, his brain scans are okay and the bullet wound itself hasn't been difficult to deal with. He's got additional bruising and probably concussion after the way that bastard treated him, but they think he's doing well, for now."

Jim nodded to himself, and then turned and peered closely at Blair, who looked away in discomfort at the intensity of the gaze.

"And you?"

"Me? Oh, my leg hurts more than my head, would you believe? It's okay, I'll heal."

"So goddamn' lucky."

"Yeah. Yeah, I was."

"No, I mean me."

Blair looked quickly at him, but Jim had turned his head away again. He cleared his throat.

"I'm going to stay a few more days, until the Cascade lot can get down here and make arrangements for him."

"You don't... I mean, I could..."

"No, I want to, okay?"

Jim nodded.

"Right." Blair hauled himself up again. "I'm going to get some sleep and a shower - not in that order, of course." He turned to leave, but found Jim close by his side, blocking his way.

"Don't go."

"Jim, you made things plain. I get it, I really do. I'll stop pressuring you."

“No. I talked bullshit. I’ve always talked bullshit about this kind of thing.”

Blair sat down again heavily.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Listen to me? Look, I knew what you meant about *déjà vu* - of course I did. I was being an asshole. Again. Those moments back then are burnt into my memory, and every time I’ve pulled them out they’ve caused such pain. So I never did. I put everything away, and refused to deal with all that happened to us. And when you felt you had to leave – well, as far as my thinking went, that was all part of the world’s preordained plan to kick Jim Ellison in the balls at every opportunity. I didn’t ever contemplate free will.”

“And you a Catholic...” Blair started grinning, despite himself.

“Shut the fuck up, Sandburg,”

There was no rancour in the voice, and Blair found his grin getting wider. He watched with a detached fascination as Jim ran his hand down the glass between them and Simon, staring at his old friend as if a glare alone would make him better. Then Jim turned back to Blair again, and sat down in the chair at his side.

“I’ve been getting so much wrong in the past years; so much. I think it’s time I tried to get things right for a change.”

“Good plan, man.”

“It’s not just this whole scenario here, bringing back unhappy memories. Since you came to Monterey, I’ve found I can’t ignore things anymore. It’s forced me to think about back then, and think about it differently; to be truthful about it all.”

He paused, and turned towards Blair.

“You know you said that Simon asked you how it all ended?”

Blair frowned, the pain of the memory making an unwelcome return.

“Yeah. So?”

“Well, what you told Simon – that wasn’t right. You’ve got to understand that. What happened was never your fault, Chief, not really. You’ve never disappointed me – not for one second. But finally being exposed as this ... *thing*, this freak of nature that I was... I felt the whole world laughing and pointing and hating. So I was blaming everyone and everything, and you got the brunt of it. I guess it seemed to you that I saw you as the scapegoat. But the joke is, all that time I was telling myself I was being fair to you, giving you space. Really, I was just running away from the truth, because it was easier.”

Blair opened his mouth to make a token protest, but Jim held up a hand.

“Ah, ah... just let me finish this, Chief, okay? The Diss was... what do they call it?... a catalyst. It wasn’t the cause itself; how we handled it was the problem. We were both caught up in our stupid preconceptions and assumptions and prejudices, unable to deal with the

fallout, and see what was real, what was important. I say 'we', but I mean especially me. You see, that was when our old life fell apart; that's how it all ended."

Blair felt his rubble burden shift and groan; he steeled himself for collapse.

"So I was thinking..."

Jim was by now staring doggedly at the vinyl floor at his feet. Blair copied his gaze and let his mind drift, distancing himself from what he knew Jim was leading up to; the calm apology, the sad acceptance, the final farewell. The vinyl was flecked brown and blue, he noticed. Was that to hide the bloodstains, or something...?

Jim kept on speaking; quiet, determined, intense.

"I was thinking, that's all gone now. It's over, good riddance. I don't want that past, I want a future. So...if maybe that's what you want, too... how about we say that here's where something new begins?"

Blair kept staring at the floor, silently mouthing Jim's words. It took some time before he realised they had a real meaning, and some time again before he worked out what that meaning might be, could be, absolutely swear-to-God was; and all that time he was vaguely wondering when the hell would Jim Ellison learn to say things in plain English.

"Chief?"

When Blair finally looked up, it was a new world.

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