



Deadline - Cascade

By Unbelievable2

illustrated by Kernel

Prologue:

Down the beach, over the packed sand, stumbling on the lines of flotsam; his ears were full of his own harsh breathing. Vaguely he could hear his mother's wails in the distance, but they were of no more meaning to him now than the cries of the disturbed gulls circling above in the mist.

Yet another Fed loomed up in front of him, but he elbowed the man aside roughly and kept running, his attention fixed on the group of armed officers on the shoreline. Blair glanced up at the Bay and saw, through breaks in the fog, Marron's sleek motor yacht emerge from behind the promontory. In seconds, it was way out beyond the moored craft, and had begun to power down the water towards the open ocean.

"Stop!" yelled Blair, waving his arms now. "Stop! Don't fire! Don't fire! There's a police officer on board!"

Some of the Feds turned to look at him blankly, but most had their guns trained on the boat.

"Stop! Hold your fire! Don't shoot!" No one was listening; there was a barrage of shots, all aimed at the launch.

"No, no, no, no, no!" screamed Blair.

A sudden orange flash out on the water lit up the mist, and there was an almost simultaneous low *boom*. Blair stopped dead in his tracks, staring out to sea. In what seemed bizarre slow-motion, the yacht rose out of the water, in flames, and split apart into recognisable pieces – a lifeboat, a window, a portion of deck – before his very eyes, then fell back into the boiling sea. There was a sudden terrible silence. Even the gulls were still for a moment or two, then they started up again in a panicked cacophony. Blair couldn't move; frozen in shock, he watched as the current took hold and the wreckage started its swift passage towards the deep Pacific.

"Jesus!" he heard one of the Feds say. "We musta hit the fuel tank."

The Tale

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Don Haas. Welcome to another edition of 'Deadline: Cascade', where we pick apart some of the more intriguing news items of the past few days.

"This evening, we're having something of a break from this format. Now, I'm sure many of you will recall the violent and tragic events that took place on the Bay a few weeks ago, involving a renowned former police officer and a major-league racketeer. I can tell you, there's an unsettling and thought-provoking story behind them, and to help me unravel it all, we're pleased to welcome to the studio Blair Sandburg, one of the men at the centre of the controversy. Welcome to the show, Mr Sandburg."

"Thanks, Don. And call me Blair, please."

"Okay, Blair. Now, just to set the scene, you were the close friend of one of the men who is thought to have died in the Sound last month, is that correct?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that's correct, Don."

"I'm sure this must be upsetting for you, Blair, given your experiences of the last few years, and what's happened so recently, but can you elaborate a little more, please?"

"Oh. Oh, yeah, sure. One of the men who died was my close friend, James J. Ellison, former detective with the Cascade PD."

"And you'd known each other some years, isn't that so?"

"Yeah, we'd been friends, very good friends, for getting on for twelve years. We first met by chance, really. Jim was having some medical problems, and it turned out that those problems were related to the key area of my studies as an anthropologist at Rainier University."

"So you're an academic. You're a Doctor, or a Professor, or what?"

"Ah, I never got to finish my doctorate, sadly. That's kind of part of this story."

"Okay, Blair. Please go on."

"Well, it turned out that Jim - Detective Ellison - was experiencing problems with his senses. He was finding the modern world very difficult to deal with. The symptoms could vary from allergic reactions to hallucinations, blinding headaches, you name it. It was very hard for him to function. What he and I worked out, by talking it through and experimenting, was that Detective Ellison's senses - sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell - were off the scale in terms of sensitivity. So the slightest noise, or bright light, or weird sensation could be very damaging to him. But the upside was that it gave him amazing, natural skills. When we controlled those senses, he was able to see further, hear more, sense more than a normal human, and identify substances by touch alone. All sorts of incredible things, really."

"So, he was a kind of Superman?"

"These aren't superpowers like you see in the comics. Granted, his senses, taken altogether, were certainly better than the vast majority of other people's, by a long, long way. But my research had already indicated that this sort of sensitivity was a remnant of skills, and a genetic predisposition, that we've brought down the millennia with us since the dawn of Mankind. They were the kinds of senses that allowed primitive peoples to stay one step ahead of Nature, helping them to survive. Remote peoples today still have these individuals, and they cherish them. They call them 'Sentinels' and, now as then, these Sentinels protect the tribe. We've lost that sense of honour and wonder, sadly. Until we talked through the issue, Jim ... Detective Ellison... believed himself to be a freak. I can tell you, that was very far from the case. He is..."

he was... a remarkable, principled and honourable human being. He was true to the role of Sentinel for this city..."

"Ah, Blair, shall we call him Jim? And maybe you can tell the viewers the nature of your relationship, for the record?"

"Yeah, sure. For the record, Jim Ellison and I were close friends, colleagues and, for the last eight years, life partners."

"So you were in a relationship?"

"Yeah. But the friendship came first."

"And that relationship didn't cause you professional problems in any way?"

"We were cautious about whom we came out to, that's for sure. Unfortunately, the world hasn't changed that much, Don. But in general, Cascade PD was accepting, if not openly approving. It didn't cause us any problems."

"But you were working together? Isn't there some rule about life partners not being teamed together?"

"Yeah, well, I wasn't really on the payroll, in a weird sort of way, for a very long time. Not as a cop anyway. Eventually I was being paid as a civilian adviser. But that's too long a story for now, I think."

"Yes, it probably is. But how about these 'Sentinel senses', as you've called them? They were the subject of a controversial thesis leaked to the Press some eight years ago. In fact, it was claimed that Jim Ellison was a 'Sentinel'. You retracted that thesis."

"At that point, yes. The media attention was detracting from the investigations going on at the time, and endangering my colleagues at the PD. So I said that it was a work of fiction."

"And, in consequence, damned your own reputation. Are you now saying that wasn't true?"

"No, sir, it was not. Jim had the senses."

"But despite all the hoo-hah, you and Jim Ellison kept working for the PD, together in a relationship, for a good couple of years subsequent to that issue. Things settled down somewhat. You were still the dream team for the Major Crimes Department, we hear; an extremely successful pairing. So, why did that all change?"



"Jim! Jim!"

Jim Ellison swung round from his study of the blackened warehouse, pretty evidently another example from the Extortionist's Handbook, to see Blair Sandburg back at the truck, waving furiously at him with one hand and holding the dashboard mic with the other. Jim frowned and jogged back to the vehicle. Blair was still speaking into the mic.

"Yeah, yeah, we'll be there right away. 35th and Horley, right? And did he say he was injured?"

"*Negative,*" came the dispatcher's voice. *"Just that he needed your help, and only you two. And to hurry."*

Jim was already listening in as he hurried up. He grabbed the mic from Blair.

"Have you alerted black-and-whites?" he snapped. "No? What are you waiting for? Get back-up in there now! We're on our way!"

He threw the mic back into the car and swung into the driver's seat. Blair was clambering in the other side.

"What the hell is Simon doing down there on his own?" he asked, a little breathlessly, as Jim threw the truck round a tight corner at the end of the industrial area and powered down the main drag back into the city. "That's Red Knives territory, isn't it? He's not popular there!"

"An understatement," replied Jim through gritted teeth. "And what the hell is Despatch playing at? They know the score when they get a call for assistance! There should be immediate back-up. He could be talking under duress."

The rest of the journey across town, blue light flashing, was in silence, apart from Blair radioing in their position as they neared the location.

"Any more calls from Captain Banks?" he asked the next Despatcher he spoke to.

"Ah, negative, Blair. Just what were you expecting?"

"Huh?" That blind-sided Blair. He tried to sound more professional. "I mean, Captain Banks called for our support. Has he called in again? What's his status? What about the back-up?"

"Um... Blair, his status is in the corridor drinking coffee. I just saw him. You need back-up? Where, exactly?"

Blair exchanged a look with Jim, who was now looking even grimmer than before.

"Ah, no. No back-up, sorry, Sandra. There's been a misunderstanding. Blair out."

He hung up the mic, and looked again at Jim who was now pulling up to some apartment blocks off Horley Street. He parked and they both got out. The area looked relaxed and quiet, with kids playing ball in the afternoon sun and some mothers out with strollers. There was none of the tense atmosphere that invariably went with a situation involving police officers and gangs.

Jim pulled out his cell-phone and speed-dialled.

"Banks."

"Simon, you in your office?"

"Jim? Yeah, I am. What's up?"

"You okay?"

"What? No, I am not okay! I've just seen our budgets for next year. Do you need something, Detective, or shouldn't you be out solving crimes somewhere?"

"Nothing, Simon. We'll explain later."

He snapped the phone shut.

"A hoax?" asked Blair, his eyes wide. "It came through on the normal Despatch channel. At least... I guess it did."

"Come on," said Jim, his eyes hooded. "Let's get back to base and regroup. We need to talk to Despatch."

Simon stared at them, perplexed.

"So, there was no call from Despatch. Did you recognise the voice?"

"Not me," replied Blair. "I was kind of focused on you being... you know... in trouble, Simon."

"Yeah, well, thanks for the concern," said Simon gruffly, and clamped a soggy cigar between his teeth.

"Me, neither, for what it's worth," added Jim. "The staff on all day are people we know and recognise. So it all points to the radio frequency being hacked in some way to send a hoax call, and get us haring like idiots to your rescue."

"It worries me that this sort of thing could have personnel running right into ambushes," said Simon bleakly. "I'm organising a full enquiry, including the IT people. Meanwhile..."

"Oh, Jim!" gasped Rhonda, suddenly pushing her head round the door frame. "Jim, it's your dad! There's a 911 out to his property. Reports of an attacker."

Jim was on his feet in a flash.

"I'm out of here." He put out a hand to Blair, who had jumped up as well. "Chief, leave this to me. You find out what you can about this hack." With that, he ran from the office, Blair left staring.

"Don't worry about him," said Simon gruffly. "It's the perp who needs to look out now."

The Loft was empty. Jim looked round for signs that Blair had been back since leaving the PD. Nope, he hadn't been home yet. He pulled out his cell and dialled again; message service.

"Chief, where the hell are you? I'm back home. Dad's fine, like I said before. Get back here now, okay?"

He closed the phone and stared unseeing across the Loft; hoax call to help Simon, hoax 911 to his dad, who had been happily playing bridge with a bunch of elderly friends and was a mite surprised at the sudden descent of the three other police vehicles, sirens blaring, called up by Jim on his breakneck drive out to the suburbs. Jim didn't like the feel of this at all, and he certainly didn't like the way Blair had seemed to go off the radar between the PD and home.

He was still staring when the Loft phone rang and he picked it up automatically, noticing the number was withheld.

"Ah, Jim? It's me, man. No need to worry, but..."

"Blair? Are you okay?"

There was a pause, and then another voice answered.

"He's just fine at the moment, Detective Ellison. But I think you need to come and collect him. Factory on the corner of Washington and Lime, out east. Come alone. You have a half-hour."

The phone went dead. Jim stared at it for a moment before replacing it on the table, and then used his cell-phone again.

"Simon? I think it just got worse. Blair may have been abducted. Washington and Lime. No, don't come after me. I'll report back as soon as."

The old factory was in fact a shell, with broken windows and a dusty yard in front. There was security fencing, but the lock had been forced and the gate was open. Jim swung the truck in front of the building and jumped out, drawing his gun, but stayed for a moment behind the cover of the car, focusing his hearing on the building.

Yeah, got it. There was Blair's heart-beat, and three others, all in the same area. He kept the gun up and made his way toward the sliding doors, which were part-open, adjusting his sight a little to compensate for the gloom within after the bright evening outside.

He saw them immediately; indeed, they were making no attempt to hide. Blair was sitting on a piece of old timber in the centre of the concrete floor, and the others were standing around him. No guns were visible, but he could easily see they were all packing. An urbane-looking man in a sports jacket – a contrast to the dark suits of the other two – motioned him in.

"Chief, you okay?" asked Jim as he moved forward, giving Blair a quick, intense once-over to assess any injuries; there appeared to be none. Blair just nodded tightly.

"Detective Ellison, greetings," called the guy who looked like he was in charge. "Nice to meet you at last. Please, do put the gun down. We're not here for a shoot-out. No one's going to get hurt."

"Like no one's been hurt so far today, despite the radio calls," spat Jim, not lowering the gun an inch. "It was you, I guess? Why?"

"I wanted to get your attention, which I now have, Detective. I also wanted to show you how very, very easy it would be for bad things to happen to people you care about. After all, bad things happen every day, don't they?"

"I'm not interested in shooting the breeze here. Let Sandburg go."

"In a while. I just need to put a proposition to you. You see, Detective, your exploits have come to the attention of my employers. They see you have some special ... what shall we call them? ... special *skills* that could be put to better use in the service of this great country of ours than working for a second-class city at the ass-end of nowhere."

"And your employers are? Oh, wait, let me guess. You're Security Services, but not very bright examples, huh? What the hell are you doing here? I'm a cop, man, just an ordinary cop. Have you guys fallen for the old tabloid hype? There's nothing to those stories. You need to start reading something a bit more high-brow than the National Enquirer back at Langley."

"Nice try, Ellison, but we've had an eye on you for a while. We know what the truth is. Yeah, it all blew up somewhat a way back, but now you're just one of the crew as far as everyone else is concerned. So this is the perfect time for you to make a career change. I promise you, you won't regret it."

"And you think by threatening my friends and family I'm going to find you the ideal employers? Go take a running jump before I decide to blow your brains out. Because I will if you don't let Sandburg go right now, and you don't lay off my family..."

"Jim," said Blair quietly, "cool it. They have guns, too."

"I know, I know. But I can take them right now and I will, if they make a step toward you. And no court will bat an eyelid, I can make sure of that."

"You reckon, Detective? This is the CIA you're talking to, here. You see, I really want to spare you from going that route. It's messy and very time-consuming. A great deal of pain and anguish would be caused to your friends, your father, your partner... I mean, your lover, here, if you don't cooperate. Shoot us, by all means, but someone else will come after me and you'll go through the whole process again. Except this time, those calls won't be hoaxes."

Jim's jaw was tightly clenched. He looked at Blair but his friend's face was unreadable. He slowly lowered his gun.

"All right, talk to me."

"So, you're alleging the CIA put pressure on you to work for them, to use Jim's special senses in covert Intelligence work?"

"It's not an allegation, Don, it's for real. The CIA have owned up to this happening six years ago. They've also admitted to files being held on both of us for some years before that, with a view to getting Jim on their team. But let's be clear about this, Jim wasn't being head-hunted for some plum post at Langley. The threats were real, and everything pointed to what we were most worried about – indeed why we had always been concerned that Jim's senses should be a secret – that the CIA viewed Jim as some kind of experiment; that he would disappear into a research facility somewhere, never to be heard of again. This wasn't a job offer, Don, we were being hijacked. The Agency was just doing it in a way that caused the fewest ripples."

"So, you acquiesced."

"In the end we did, but God knows we did some arguing over it. This guy – Baxter he's called – gave us some time to think it over, which was real nice of him, don't you think? That we should weigh up the attractions of Jim being buried by them and keeping his friends and family safe, or Jim being buried by them and all his friends and family being killed. In the end, the only condition we made was that I went as well. In fact, they needed me, even though they didn't know it. I was attuned to Jim, I could help him control his senses. I was pretty necessary to the team. The CIA didn't do all their research. I wasn't too optimistic about my long-term survival, to be honest, but the negotiations gave us something to play with, while we got our own plan together."

"So, what did the CIA want you to do?"

"They were going to fake our deaths for us. Then there would be no hue and cry about abduction. There was going to be a car accident – a big one – and remains would be found that the CIA could make sure went on the records as our remains. We'd be officially dead, and no one would come looking for us. We had to do a bit of play-acting, of course, but as a plan I guess you could say it was pretty good. It's just we knew we were colluding in our own destruction. I didn't make for a happy period."

"And of course, you could tell no one."

"That's right. We were carrying on our daily lives as if nothing had happened. The calls – even the one to Jim about me being abducted – were put down to teenage hackers at Rainier, though no one was ever prosecuted. Not a surprise, as they didn't exist, but the CIA manufactured all sorts of evidence, all the way along."

"But not telling your families... that must have hurt."

"Yes. Yes, it did. My mom and I were kind of estranged already. Our relationship had become very difficult after she leaked my dissertation to the Press, and it had never really recovered. In retrospect, her actions had contributed greatly to the fix we were in, so I had few pangs. After

all, I hardly saw her from one year to the next, most of the time. But I didn't want to hurt our friends, and Jim was very distressed about the anguish it would cause his father."

"So, you were going to collude in your own disappearance. But that's not exactly what happened in the end, was it?"

"No, Don. We weren't going gently, let me tell you. We had our own plan."

"I TOLD YOU, SANDBURG, I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR GRIPING! I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOU, IN FACT! YOU WANTED TO COME CAMPING, WE'RE HERE CAMPING. DEAL WITH IT!"

"Jim, you're getting red in the face," said Blair quietly, glancing round the rest of the campsite with an expression he hoped looked like a mixture of annoyance and shock. Then he raised his voice.

"YOU WANNA BEHAVE LIKE AN ASSHOLE, YOU BEHAVE LIKE ONE! I'M SICK OF YOU PUSHING ME AROUND!"

"I need to be red in the face, surely," said Jim with a frown, then shouted: "YOU LITTLE PRICK, YOU JUST FIND FAULT ALL THE TIME! I SHOULD THUMP YOU!"

"DON'T YOU RAISE YOUR HAND TO ME, YOU BASTARD!" Then, in a whisper, "Not so you get an aneurism, for God's sake!" The volume went up again. "I WANNA GO BACK TO CASCADE. WE ARE OVER, YOU DIG? OVER! I JUST WANT MY TENT AND THEN I'M SPLITTING!"

"Your tent?" asked Jim incredulously, fighting a smile. "That's what you want to most out of this relationship?"

"Jeeesus, man, keep in character. YEAH, MY TENT! I PAID FOR IT"

"FINE. KEEP THE GODDAMN TENT. JUST PACK NOW! YOU GOT TEN MINUTES."

And two hours later, in the dark, on a mountain road and with another Oscar-winning performance behind them that had almost resulted in hot-dogs being thrown, they stood poised on the brink of the abyss, quite literally.

"Can you see the bottom?" asked Blair, gingerly peering over.

"Yeah, but it's way, way down. They picked a good spot. Jesus, I'm hungry. I hated wasting that food back there. I could have done with it. We've had nothing decent to eat for days."

"Getting your appetite back, now it's actually happening? Yeah, me, too. Hey, I'll buy you a burrito when we get there."

"Thanks a bunch. I'll have died of malnutrition by then. Nice work in the diner, by the way. The mustard was an inspired touch."

"Yeah, I thought so, too. God, that was the most fun we've had for... I dunno, feels like forever."

Jim reached out and ruffled Blair's hair.

"Forever's just about to happen, Chief." Blair looked up, and suddenly they were in a tight embrace. After a few moments, Jim kissed Blair's forehead.

"Ready?" asked Blair.

"Yep. Though I'm sorry for the truck."

"Jim, I'm sorry for it all..."

"Hey, hey! We don't go there, we agreed, right? It's *not* your fault. They would have done this eventually. We were on borrowed time. This is the only thing I can think of to do."

"It's *our* plan, remember? And it's not theirs, and that's what counts. Come on."

The truck was pathetically easy to push over the edge. Primed, it exploded in a satisfying fireball the moment it landed at the cliff bottom. By then, Jim and Blair were already making their way off to the west, downhill through the pines. A mile further on and across a small stream, they reached a dirt road. Jim looked around, and then unerringly led them up a small slope to the side, where a pile of brush had been dumped. He pulled some branches aside.

"Wow!" he breathed. "Harleys! This puts more of a shine on running away!"

"It is *not* running away," said Blair firmly. "It's a matter of life or death, and this is our escape. Anyway, Alec can afford it. Since his uncle died, this would barely dent his petty cash for the month."

He dragged out one of the bikes and poked into the saddle bag. "Everything's here, the Lord Krishna bless him." Then he gave a low whistle. "Oh, wow!"

"Lemme see!"

"There must be thousands here, Jim. And this is on top of what we've arranged ourselves!"

"Like you said," replied Jim with the first grin he'd worn since Baxter had come calling, "he can afford it. Come on, let's hit the road."

As the bikes roared off into the night, a man far over on the other side of the mountain got out of a four-by-four, slammed his door and kicked a tyre, hard.

"Shouldn't they be here by now, sir?" asked the driver, leaning out of his window.

"Of course they should have!" spat the man. "Of course they damn well should! Oh, Ellison's gonna pay for this...."

"And that was it? You just rode away? That all sounds remarkably simple."

"Well, in fact it took a huge amount of planning and organisation. We didn't go off on a whim, we knew exactly where we were going and via which route, which was pretty circuitous once we'd got out of the country. We had to have sufficient resources put aside, and we had to do all that completely off the radar, and stay off. It was fraught for a while."

"But you had help? The motorbikes, for instance."

"We had to keep the whole thing secret, of course. If we told people, our cover would be in danger of being blown. That's kind of the rule with this sort of stuff. No one can know, or you are compromised."

"But there was someone?"

"We told one friend what was happening. One person who was sufficiently removed from us on a day-to-day basis that no one would think to query whether they knew anything about what had happened to us. That person helped us with some of the arrangements, yes. We are incredibly grateful for their willingness to get drawn into our situation. We will be forever in their debt."

"But Jim's dad, your mom, your friend Captain Banks, they were all in the dark?"

"Of course. That was essential, to keep them safe. The less they knew, the less they could be put under pressure."

"So you left the country. Where do you go? How did you live?"

"Sorry, Don, I can't go into that detail. For obvious reasons."

"Okay, but answer me this if you can. Why didn't they go for your loved ones again, to pull you out of hiding?"

"That's an interesting one, and something that caused us a lot of soul-searching. I mean, were we just exchanging one risk for another? Would they be in just as much danger, even more perhaps, given the threats that Baxter made when we first met him? But what we gambled on, and it seemed to play out that way, is that they realised that it would be too obvious to do it right away. Just as Baxter had claimed they didn't want to cause actual physical harm to our families, because people would start asking questions if we then disappeared. It was a last resort for him. As it was, the world thought we were dead and so there was no immediate risk to the Agency. However, assuming we were still alive, then maybe we could be got out of hiding

again at some stage. The Agency were playing a long game, we decided, so we had a grace period."

"So you hid from the world. Very successfully it would appear, because your deaths were certainly accepted as the truth here."

"Yeah, well, we have the expertise of the CIA to thank for that. Their skills in that respect are pretty remarkable. We left the details up to them, but I assume they planted forensic material at the accident site, and there was some additional tampering with records in the Forensic department at the PD."

"But when you'd got away, you were happy?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we were. We were alive, we were together; that was the important thing. But at the same time, the feeling that we'd run away never left us. It was always there in the background. It always rankled, and there was always the worry that things could blow up again. So yeah, it was happiness tinged with much regret, and a sort of constant anxiety. We were never at ease."

"So, there you were, leading new lives and, as far as you knew, if you kept your heads down, you should be safe. What happened to change that?"

"Are you kidding me?" asked Simon, incredulous. "You are seriously suggesting I've taken bribes from Jackman? Jesus, I've spent the last seven years trying to bring the guy to book, him and Bruce Marron both! I've spent my entire career trying to beat this kind of low-life! You seriously believe I'm going to get into bed with them? Take their money?"

The Commissioner put up a calming hand.

"Captain, I'm very aware of your record to date, but the fact remains that very serious allegations about your past dealings with Jackman have been made. Our I.A. colleagues here" – he gestured to the other two men at the table – "must of course investigate."

Simon turned to Beverley Sanchez.

"You know about this?"

"Absolutely not!" replied Beverley with indignation. She turned to the Internal Affairs officers.

"I should like to see the evidence behind these allegations, please."

"Miss Sanchez," said the Commissioner sharply, "you will remember that your job is to prosecute wrongdoing in this context."

"Not if it's blatantly a fabrication!" retorted Beverley. "How can you believe Captain Banks is involved in anything like that? The allegations are, no doubt, anonymous? I thought so. It must

surely occur to you that Captain Banks is getting so close to both racketeers, finally and after much hard work, that one or the other of them would want to remove him from the scene, and destroy our case against them."

"Nevertheless," replied the Commissioner with ill-concealed irritation, "steps need to be taken." He turned again to Simon.

"Captain Banks, you will surrender your badge and gun."

"I'm suspended?" Simon's voice was harsh with fury. "Why don't you just arrest me and have done with it? It's what Marron and his kind want!"

"No need for that just now. I'd prefer to call it gardening leave. Let due process take its course, Captain Banks."

Beverley Sanchez leaned over and took Simon's arm.

"Come on, I'll take you home." She turned to the Commissioner. "You're making a huge mistake."

"Time will tell, Miss Sanchez," replied the Commissioner, with a smooth smile.

He raised his glass to the setting sun and watched the trickles of condensation crawl downwards, twisting his hand this way and that.

"Are you going to drink that beer, or write a dissertation on it?"

Blair didn't reply, so Jim came up behind him and wrapped his arms around his shoulders, pressing his face into the junction of throat and collarbone. Blair stretched his neck to allow Jim better access, and his lips parted in pleasure as Jim kissed his way up to an earlobe.

"Hmmm?"

"Uh-huh," replied Blair, placing his drink carefully back on the rickety table next to the bottle, and turning to give Jim more attention. After a while, Jim reached out and picked up the glass, taking a swig and then offering it to Blair, who took a long gulp, Jim watching him all the while.

"You don't have to do the ritual here, you know, Chief. It's only the local brew."

"It's nice to do." Blair rubbed the glass against his own hot cheek and then Jim's. "Like a little connection, still. And it helps me relax, thinking about those good things."

"Not good enough here for you, babe?" Jim's voice was teasing.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I'm where I want to be, with you. Nothing could be better than that. But there's people I miss. You do, too. And things I can't forget."

Jim slid onto the bench beside him and drew him close.

"Jitters again?"

"A bit. Some days are better than others, you know that."

"Yeah. Look, Chief, everything is fine. The perimeter is sealed, the boat is fuelled and ready, the food is stored, the well is still working fine, and the mice have left the fifty-dollar bills alone. Your firewalls are all in place. That's worth some relaxation, surely?"

Blair looked up at him.

"Yeah, okay, man. We live to fight another day."

"I'm a lover not a fighter, babe. And I can prove it."

Blair punched him in the side, but started grinning nonetheless. Jim took the glass back and downed most of the golden liquid.

"What was that micro-brew you really liked, again?"

"Wasp Sting."

"Oh, yeah. Simon liked that a lot as well, didn't he?"

Blair's smile was sad now; Jim squeezed his shoulder.

"One day, babe. One day."

Blair picked up the bottle and together they toasted the setting sun.

"Now," said Jim, "What about some serious canoodling?"

"Oh yeah, man. I'm up for that. You can canoodle me senseless, if you want. But I kinda expected dinner first, you know? And you're the primal, hunter-gatherer type in this here partnership."

"You wait till you see what I've got!" Jim gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and got up, walking over to where he'd left his basket on the way up from the beach. He retrieved it, and brought it over to Blair.

"Take a look!"

Inside lay two large, blue lobsters with wide, fat claws.

"A great aphrodisiac, I'm told," he leered.

"Jim, they're amazing! Wow, Thermidor here we come. But where the hell did you find two like that?"

"Out beyond the far headland. The rocks are full of stuff, but you have to go pretty deep."

"Jim..." The tone was admonishing.

"It's okay, babe. I'm careful, I promise. And you know what's even better? I've worked out, by doing a sort of sense piggy-back and concentrating on what I'm feeling in my lungs, I can keep going without breath far longer than I thought I could. So I can get deeper."

"Really?" Blair's eyes were wide, and his brain was clearly already making calculations. "You mean... wow, there must be some deep physiological response there. Maybe you're able to sense, and so tap, those oxygen reserves most of us don't use in the breath we take. Maybe your blood supply is optimising what your senses say you need. Maybe..."

Jim kissed him quiet. After a while, allowed to come up for air, he added breathlessly:

"You know, don't you, that's still my favourite aphrodisiac?"

"The senses? D'oh. What do you think?"

Words stopped and actions increased. The lobsters stirred uneasily in their basket, and somewhere in the house behind them there was a *ping!*

"Hey, hon," said Jim, lifting his head for a moment, his eyes dreamy, "you've got mail."

Simon Banks twisted the cap off the bottle and poured the golden liquid slowly, almost reverently, then sat back in the garden chair and raised the glass up to the evening sun. He was on gardening leave, as they called it, so he was going to damn well garden and, to be honest, the physical exercise had done him good, getting rid of some of the pent-up anger, and taking his mind away from endlessly revolving the allegations against him.

So it had been a hot, tiring day clearing his garden, but the fatigue felt good – a virtuous hurt – and the beer was the reward he had been promising himself.

He took his first sip, and, despite his thirst, did his best to savour the coolness, the refreshing bitterness. It was a ritual learnt long ago, in his own kitchen in fact, when Sandburg first introduced him to the joys of the *Wasp Sting* micro-brewery. He and Jim had come round for something or other – furniture-moving or picture-hanging or some such excuse when he'd first bought the place – and had stayed for pizza and beer. Except Blair had insisted on bringing this particular brew, recently discovered.

Simon still bought that brew – not just out of loyalty, he really enjoyed the taste. Now he sipped again, and held the glass to his forehead to cool off. He could picture it all now. Blair at the table, opening bottles, Jim leaning against the refrigerator with his usual expression of amused

tolerance at the excited monologue which accompanied the ceremonial pouring. Thirsty and impatient, Simon had heard probably one word in four:

"...tiny, tiny operation, maybe ten people..."

"... farmers' markets, you know, country fairs..."

"...actual spring water from the Cascades..."

"...and those hops I've seen myself, right on the meadows around"

"...native peoples of the Puget Sound area frequently...."

And then Jim had detached himself from the refrigerator and leant down, wrapping his arms around Blair's shoulders and putting a palm softly over his mouth...

"Tell Simon later, Chief, so he doesn't die of thirst."

... and had kissed him, soundly, warmly, without any embarrassment, right on the corner of his jaw. Blair had blushed and squirmed a little, though clearly happy, and Simon had wondered again at the unexpected ease with which Jim Ellison, once he had taken the plunge, had adjusted to this new relationship, leaving Sandburg – surprisingly – as the bashful one. Amongst friends, though, their deep commitment was not only clear to see but also happily demonstrative, and Simon, conservative to a fault as he was, had nevertheless found himself completely at ease with his friends' new status.

So he had sipped the beer as Blair had instructed and savoured the unusual but refreshing taste. And then he had eagerly gulped some more, until Jim had said, with a twinkle:

"Go easy there, Simon. The size of those bottles is in inverse proportion to their price. Plus the store only had four."

He sipped again, back now in the present in his evening garden, the taste bringing back the old memories, bittersweet just like his drink, and as always his detective's mind reviewed the evidence against him in the old case of Ellison and Sandburg. To his eternal shame, he had never seen how things had changed for them. Only hindsight had shown the clues he should have spotted at the time – the tense faces, the muttered conversations, the lack of laughter – which should have been so obvious to a close friend, but in fact only registered after it happened. Only when they dragged the wreckage from the canyon bottom and he began to ask questions about the cause of the accident did scattered images from those last weeks start slipping into place.

But there had been nothing left in the twisted, burnt metal to suggest anything other than it being a tragic accident. Nothing there, but a little ball of doubt and suspicion had lodged in his brain that day and hadn't shifted over the years. Never would now, he supposed.

He raised the glass to the light again and admired the condensation trickling down the sides, the refraction of the light, the play of the bubbles.

"Simon, you wouldn't believe the way they brew this...."

The forensic report had said the burn damage indicated an instant fireball, which had left only the barest traces of bone and fabric, but the requisite DNA evidence had been there. There was little left to tell what had caused the car to leave the road at that point, but patrons of a campsite twenty miles further up the track, and also those in a café closer to Cascade, had told officers that Blair and Jim had been arguing bitterly about something, and had almost come to blows at one point. It had seemed so out of character with the devotion he was used to seeing that he couldn't believe it at first. Instead, he immersed himself in their current cases, looking for evidence of an arranged hit.

The two of them at that point had been very involved in investigations against Cascade's main racketeers, Harry Jackman and Bruce Marron. And those two fine, upstanding citizens were guilty as sin of everything from drugs to prostitution to plain old extortion, but getting evidence to stick was being tough. He had been sure one or the other was responsible for the crash, but he could find nothing to incriminate them, so reluctantly he gave up on that approach and had Major Crimes reopen all likely old cases, certain that they'd find some ancient vendetta. But still the work had revealed nothing. The banal conclusion was that, in the greatest waste of potential the world had ever seen, Blair Sandburg and Jim Ellison had argued in a speeding vehicle on a cliff road, on a wet night and he had lost them.

And that had been that. There had been a memorial service, on a surprisingly sunny October morning, and someone had broken into the Loft whilst most of Cascade P D had been paying their last respects. A rough, vicious job, with personal effects and mementoes strewn everywhere, though nothing obviously taken except for Blair's laptop. Whether papers were missing he really couldn't have said; Blair's life revolved around piles of paper – who could tell?

He had gathered up the scattered photos left in the wreckage, replaced them in Jim's albums, and brought them home. He looked at them from time to time; even caught Daryl, once, poring over them with an intensity that had forced Simon to move silently away and wipe his eyes.

Eventually it had been put down to a minor burglary, and, as with the accident itself, most people had moved on. Simon had brooded, and he continued to brood, on days when the thoughts took him, or moments like this caused him to reminisce. What had their whispers been about? Why hadn't they confided in him? Had Blair's fears about Jim's vulnerability to outside interests – confessed one tense evening when more scotch than was wise had been imbibed – finally been realised? And most indulgent of all, what if they had faked it? It wouldn't have been beyond Sandburg's imaginative powers, or Jim's technical abilities.

That would be nice, Simon reflected; the idea that, somewhere or other, Jim and Blair were living under assumed names, far from the reach of nefarious agencies and government programmes. His fantasy, of course, but better than the cold reality of their deaths. He'd stick to that, he concluded, and drink their health, wherever they were, in *Wasp Sting* micro-brew. It

was a comfort of sorts, but, man, did he miss them. And man, could he do with their expertise now. There was a bad feeling deep in his gut that he was heading for a fall; a very bad fall.

His dark musings were interrupted by the doorbell. Grumbling, he got up and opened the door to find a young man on the step. He was tall and slim, with sandy hair pulled back in a short ponytail and a neat goatee beard. The young man smiled warmly.

"Captain Banks? Hope you don't mind my calling unexpectedly. I would be really glad to have a few moments of your time."

Simon looked for a briefcase.

"What are you selling? Because I don't want any."

The young man grinned.

"No, I'm not going door to door, honestly! I'm Alec Summers. I kind of got involved with Blair Sandburg and Jim Ellison, years back."

Simon stared, racking his brains, and then grinned.

"Alec? The kid with the spiders?"

"Yep, that's me."

"Come in, son, come in!" Simon ushered him through. "Come and have a beer. Forgive my surliness, I have a lot on my mind now."

"Thanks, Captain, I'd love one. I know it's kind of late to say this, but I was really sorry about Blair and Jim."

"We all are, son," said Simon heavily, handing him a bottle. "Now, what's been happening with you?"

"Me? Oh, I have a few readerships dotted around various universities. They all want me, but I can't quite settle on the subject yet. So I'm having a great time, working on what I feel like, and stringing them all along."

"You were always book-smart. Guess you're pretty street-smart, too!"

"I've always been selfish, Captain Banks. That's the key thing."

They exchanged a wry look.

"Plus," added Alec, sipping at the beer, "my great-uncle died – oh, quite a few years ago, now. Stinking rich, and a miser with it. He had no one, and he left it all to me. So, I'm a pretty free agent."

"Well, here's to you," said Simon, tipping his bottle, and forcing a smile for the man who clearly hadn't lost the smugness of his youth. "Use it wisely."

"Oh, I intend to. For a start, I've created a charitable Foundation which will work in various sectors, and I'm partly here to sound you out about whether you'd consider heading up a major study on the future of policing. It would be some years in the making, and I'm sure it would lead to other things after that. You'd be attached to Rainier."

"Me? An academic?"

"Don't knock it till you've tried it."

Simon twirled his bottle, musing.

"Can't say it's not intriguing," he said finally. "I sure am tired of being one step behind the bad guys with policy and procedures that always seem to be reactive, not proactive, you know? Your study sounds like something I could get my teeth into. But Alec, you have to be aware, there's a cloud over me right now."

"Oh, I know."

"You know?"

"Yeah, because of the other thing I'm here to tell you about. Captain Banks, you know when Blair and Jim disappeared...."

Simon swung round to face the window, his eye caught by the flash of police lights in his drive. He and Alec exchanged a look, but before they could speak there was sudden thunder as someone pounded at the front door. A voice was shouting outside.

"Captain Banks, open up, please. This is Agent Hendrikson of the FBI. My men and I are armed. Please open the door and raise your hands."

"Okay, okay!" shouted Simon. "Just don't break the door down!" He turned to Alec. "Stay behind me, son."

The open door revealed a group of dark-suited Feds with guns. The guy in charge stepped forward and took Simon's arm. Simon instinctively pulled away, and the guns came up immediately.

"Whoa, whoa!" yelled Alec.

"And who are you, sir?" asked Hendrikson.

"I'm a friend of the family," replied Alec calmly. "What's this about, Agent Hendrikson?"

Hendrikson turned back to Simon.

"Simon Banks, I am arresting you on suspicion of corrupt practices in collusion with the racketeer Harold Jackman, and of the murders of Blair Sandburg and James Ellison."

Alec picked them up at the airport.

"They've got him at a detention facility. In solitary for now, so there's some protection at least, but I don't know for how long."

"Jesus," breathed Jim.

"Anything more tangible come to light?" asked Blair.

"The latest bizarre twist," replied Alec, making for the exit that would take them out to the north suburbs, "is that they're alleging part of the reason he killed you was that he wanted your apartment."

"Jesus God, how moronic are they?" groaned Jim. "It was entirely clear all the time that Simon was renting from my dad, so he had an easy commute in the week. It was my dad who suggested it, for crissakes!"

"After some kid planted the idea," added Blair with a shadow of a smile. "You've been to see him, Alec?"

"Of course. He's really excited. Well, me, too, to be honest. And the Commissioner is all lined up for tomorrow. I'm got him salivating at the thought of money from my Foundation. Fat chance, but he doesn't know that. I've asked Miss Sanchez to attend as well. Now, *she* is something, all right..."

"Behave yourself, boy!"

Alec grinned.

"You're one to talk. Though of course that's a past life now, isn't it? Old Married Couple ahoy."

"Ain't it just," breathed Blair, looking sideways out of the window.

Jim reached back and touched his knee.

"Call her."

"No, Jim, we talked about this."

"Call her. What harm can it do now? We're here. Anyone can find us."

The dusk gathered some more, and it was dark by the time they arrived at the Ellison mansion. He resisted as long as he could, but the sight of Jim taking his father – frailer, so much older

now – into his arms at the doorway, shattered his resolve. He pulled out one of the new phones that Alec had given them and dialled a long–memorised cell–phone number, hardly expecting anyone to answer.

She did.

"Jesus Christ," said the Commissioner in a small voice. "Jesus Christ."

They were in the Commissioner's swanky office at the top of the tower. The desk was big and polished, and the IA guy sat at the Commissioner's right hand. On the other side was the chief Fed, Hendrikson, who had been leading the Marron investigation for the Bureau.

"So you see," continued Blair, in his practised, steady, clear diction, well–used to tutoring idiots, "not only was the report of our deaths much exaggerated, it is obviously nonsensical to suggest that Simon Banks had anything to do with it. We've made clear who was responsible, and we suspect they've had a hand in the falsification of records at the PD which allowed them to incriminate Captain Banks."

"Explain again about the computer files," asked the Fed. "What you suggest would take some doing."

"Of course it would, and you've already seen our proof that the Agency had inside help from Major Crimes department itself. But our conclusive evidence of Simon Banks' innocence is what we've shown you in these papers, which duplicate the files that existed six years ago, when we had to disappear. I had all the evidence in the Marron and Jackman investigations saved on my laptop for working on at home. Against PD policy, I know, but hey, I wasn't a cop anyway. We copied everything on that hard–drive for insurance, and took it with us, leaving the originals on the laptop for cover, of course. I gather the laptop was stolen after we 'died', so that would have been the Agency looking for us, or maybe Marron's people making sure to lose any evidence we had against him."

"And those original records show clearly that the data sources used by the PD have been falsified and that the allegations against Simon Banks are entirely bogus," added Jim, his face expressionless, but his eyes burning with barely–contained rage. "So I suggest you get him out of that facility this second, and back here safely within the hour. Or, I assure you, there will be hell to pay. Have no doubt about that."

Blair observed the Commissioner paling further, and thought back to a short time earlier that morning, when the combination of Beverley's research and their own retained records meant they could corner Detective Rafe at his Major Crimes desk, and watch him disintegrate before their eyes.

"What do you think?" he'd babbled. "How hard did I have to work to get here? And that little shit" – pointing at Blair – "just did whatever he liked! I could never get anyone to praise *me* for my work, but the sun shone out of *him*, as far as Banks was concerned! Everyone was just taken in by the two of them. I had a life to live, I had a lifestyle I wanted! You think I can get that on a cop's pay? A detective Banks would never promote?"

Disgusted, they had left Rafe in the care of his erstwhile partner, Brown, not caring what happened to him next. Which wouldn't have been good, if Henri's expression had been anything to go by.

Jim picked up the Commissioner's desk phone and handed him the receiver.

"Dial, sir. Now, please."

The Commissioner attempted a defiant look, but he dialed nonetheless, and relayed Jim's instructions without further protest. Alec was grinning smugly at the back of the room, and Blair was on the brink of allowing himself a deep breath of relief, when the door opened without preamble and another Fed hurried in, and spoke to Hendrikson in a low tone. Blair saw Jim suddenly break his gaze with the Commissioner to stare at Hendrikson.

Oh no, he thought.

"There's been a development," said Hendrikson, rising. Jim was also out of his chair. "Marron is making a break for it. He clearly thinks we've enough on him. And something else, too, I'm afraid."

"So, I'm kind of finding this hard to follow, here, Blair. You're saying Baxter was working with Marron?"

"Exactly. It was an unholy alliance with the CIA. Baxter was looking for a hook to catch us with, and Marron knew the PD were closing in on him. Together, they hatched the plan that would incriminate Simon Banks, thinking that, as well as derailing the PD's investigations, it was likely to bring us out of the woodwork, and they were right. In the meantime, Marron's competitor had to be got out of the way, as part of the deal. As you know, Harry Jackman died in an apparent gas explosion at his home a few days before Captain Banks' arrest. A nice bit of dirty tricks expertise, and Marron was out of the frame."

"But when you and Jim gave the PD the evidence they needed..."

"Yeah, not only could we prove beyond any doubt that we were alive and that Captain Banks had had no part in our disappearance, but the computer files we'd retained could be cross-checked against the ones that were alleged to incriminate Captain Banks in taking bribes from Jackman. We could show incontrovertibly that the historical PD files had been tampered with, and we now know that a disgruntled member of the Major Crimes team had willingly assisted the CIA to try

to bring both us and Captain Banks down. The moment that was clear, Marron saw his number was up and wanted out. Baxter had already agreed to help him get out of Cascade if things went wrong. He'd organised a freighter offshore that would have taken Marron to a non-extradictable jurisdiction, and all Marron had to do was get on his yacht and get out there."

"But Baxter added an extra twist, didn't he?"

"Right. We were told that Marron was holding my mother hostage. We could have her safe, in return for Jim. We were right back where we started, six years before, it seemed."

"I've come alone," said Jim calmly, "and unarmed, like you asked. Now let her go."

There was a slim white yacht – a launch, really; Marron wasn't that ostentatious – moored loosely to the pontoon where they were standing, at the outer edge of the Marina. Marron looked nervous, but the gun at Naomi's head didn't waver. Threads of fog wafted around them.

"You okay, Naomi?" asked Jim gently.

"Yes, yes, Jim. Thank you, thank you. Now Blair will be safe, won't he?"

She was smiling in a wild, ecstatic way that puzzled the part of Jim's brain that wasn't focussed on Marron. He put it down to hysteria.

"There are Feds all around here, you know," he told Marron. "Waiting to take you out."

"They can try," said Marron. "This boat is fast."

"So, why me?" asked Jim, edging forward a little. Marron gestured him back with the gun.

"No idea. That's your friend Baxter's call." Jim stiffened at the name. At least now they had proof of who had been calling the shots in this tangle of evidence and motive.

"And...?"

"And, I gather, he'll be picking you up from here." At the periphery of his vision, Jim saw movement at the marina edge; Baxter and his team. Only to be expected, he thought.

"Yeah, that's what's supposed to happen," continued Marron. "But you know what? I don't care. I've got a rendezvous to make, and I can't wait any longer. Baxter can take you if he wants, but it's time I left."

In a deft movement, he flung Naomi away from him, and jumped into the yacht, taking the wheel and throttling forward, the mooring slipping away and trailing behind the stern. Jim grabbed at Naomi before she could fall into the water, and pulled her back, then dropped her on the pontoon and started running after the yacht. Blair leapt out from his cover, in the scrub

at the head of the pontoon, and ran towards his mother. He picked her up tenderly, all the while shouting at Jim.

"Let him go, you idiot! Jim! Let it go! It's over!"

Naomi clawed at him.

"Let him do it, Blair! It's perfect for everyone. Let Jim go! He was never any good for you! You can be free of him. If that man doesn't kill him, then Ed Baxter will take him just like he should have done years ago. Instead, you let Jim Ellison take you away from me. I never got to make things right with you, don't you see?"

Blair pushed her away, staring wild-eyed.

"You? You were part of this? Mom, how could you do that to us? That man is the enemy. He wanted to *disappear* us! We would have died!"

"Only Jim, sweetie. He only wanted Jim! But Jim had you in his thrall, so you went with him. It made perfect sense for me to help Ed this time round. I told him that, six years ago. I can make things right again, really I can!"

Blair stood up shakily, still staring at her in horror, then turned and ran madcap for the beach where he knew the Feds were waiting.

"Can I ask about your mother? It must be difficult to deal with the part she played in this."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is, Don. I'm still dumbfounded by her willingness to act as a pawn for Baxter, for being so ready to deal with an organisation that all my life she had vilified as being nothing more than state-sponsored terrorism. I've not been too willing to talk to her since... since all this happened. But from what she's said to justify herself, and from what I can piece together, I think she thought that somehow she was making amends for destroying my career, when she leaked my dissertation without my knowledge. In fact, she'd also endangered my life, of course, because what she did kind of started the ball rolling. We may have been at the edge of the CIA's radar before, but after the media furore that followed what she did, we were suddenly front and centre. Plus – and this is hardest of all to deal with – I think she blamed Jim for turning me into something she had always despised."

"What? Your relationship?"

"Oh, no, no! That alone would never have worried her. No, the problem for her was that I'd become part of what she had always regarded as the enemy, the forces of law and order. She never trusted my associations with the PD, believing any police force was tantamount to fascism. She felt Jim had influenced me unduly, which of course couldn't be further from the truth. The work of the PD itself is enough to inspire anyone. But nevertheless, she hated what

I'd become, and hated Jim for it. I see that now. This was her way of putting things right, however deluded she was. But her hatred made her fair game for Baxter. He found it easy to persuade her that she could get what she wanted – remove Jim's influence from me and get me back on her side – by acting as his pawn and becoming part of his plan."

"A terrible act of betrayal."

"Yes. Yes, it was. Of course, I now understand that she was only a minor, if ultimately very useful, player in Baxter's game. She was just a blindly willing patsy. But what she did.... "

"So, Blair, what happened at the boat...."

"Let him go, you idiot! Jim! Let it go! It's over!"

Like hell, this time, thought Jim. The yacht had to turn at the end of the pontoon to reach open water. He had a chance. Not this time. This guy, at least, is gonna pay.

The boat started banking and Jim was there, leaping out into the foggy air. He missed the gunwale, but his flailing hands found the loose rope hanging down over the stern. As the yacht powered away, he pulled himself up, hand over hand at the stern; the wash buffeted him, sheer fury and adrenaline drove him forward. A knee over the top and he was on board, launching himself at Marron, who leapt away from the wheel and grabbed his gun again, pointing it at Jim. Pilotless, the boat lurched, and both men lost their balance. As Jim recovered, he glanced sideways at the shore and saw the line of Feds in ambush. He threw his sight out further, and guessed what would happen next.

"I'm getting rid of you once and for all, Ellison, you bastard!" yelled Marron, firing wild.

Likewise, thought Jim, and dived for the side, and the green water beyond.

There was a sudden terrible silence. Even the gulls were still for a moment or two, then they started up again in a panicked cacophony. Blair couldn't move; frozen in shock, he watched as the current took hold and the wreckage started its swift passage towards the deep Pacific.

"Jesus!" he heard one of the Feds say. "We musta hit the fuel tank."

"Get a boat out there!" shouted another Fed.

"A boat!" yelled Blair, suddenly galvanised back into action. "A boat! Get out there! They could be alive!"

He turned this way and that, looking for a craft. There were a few dinghies drawn up on the shore, and he started running towards them, some other Feds with him. A Coastguard

helicopter, presumably one that had been on stand-by to help with Marron's apprehension, swooped overhead in a deafening rush, and made for the wreckage. Hauling at a dinghy, Blair heard a Fed's radio crackle.

"Coastguard One to shore. We see the wreckage. Pretty much disintegrated. We see one body at least. Correction, body parts...."

Blair straightened up, staring out to sea.

Not like this, he thought. Not after everything, please. Not a random, unlucky shot from a random, clueless Fed.

And now there was Baxter, right there in front of him. He had no memory of haring up the beach towards the familiar, hated figure who had just appeared on the skyline. He had no recollection of reaching the man, or of how he felled him with the first blow, or even of how long he rained blows down on his head, or how many. He was only suddenly aware of strong arms pulling him back, and Baxter a bloody mess on the sand.

"Blair, are you okay? Are you all right to continue? I think we're almost at the end now."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm okay. Just a second..."

"Okay, so here we are now. It's a month on. We know that Marron died in the blast; his body was recovered. But so far, they've only found clothing and effects belonging to Jim Ellison. There's no hope, I guess, that this fine man, this 'Sentinel', is still alive?"

"I would love to think that, Don, I really would. I wake up each morning and still expect him to be beside me. They trawled all of the Bay. I was out there with them, every shift. We all were, all our friends in Major Crimes. Our true friends, that is. But there's nothing. The yacht went down in one of the deepest sections of the Bay. There's a very strong current that runs there, pretty much scouring the bottom. It only took a day before most of the yacht wreckage that sank had already been dragged far out along the seabed. We were hampered by the fog right at the start, and the Coastguard say that if we didn't find a body within the day, there's little hope it's going to be found. Most people who are lost in the Bay don't come up for years, if ever. They get dragged far out into the ocean, and frankly, once they're there, anything can happen to a... to a corpse. So I'm kind of resigned now to the fact that he's gone."

"I'm really sorry for your loss, Blair. I met Jim Ellison many times when he was serving with the Cascade PD, as you know, and though we had our differences, I know for certain he was a fine, upstanding officer, and a good man."

"You're right there, Don, but thank you. And can I thank all the people of Cascade for their messages of sympathy to the PD and the Ellison family? They are much appreciated, I know. I

have to say, there's a little bit of me that wishes everyone had been more appreciative when Jim was alive, but that's me being churlish, I guess."

"So, what's next for Blair Sandburg?"

"Well, as you know, Don, I'm going to be doing some more interviews in Cascade, for the Press, and then I fly to DC to speak in front of an ad hoc Senate committee that's been put together to look at this case and the unauthorised powers that the CIA have been applying against citizens, such as the campaign against Jim Ellison. I know the Agency has assured me that their pursuit of Jim was never official policy, and that they have no intention of running any such campaign again, but the fact remains that, from the point at which my dissertation was first leaked eight years ago until his disappearance in the Bay, Jim Ellison was seen by some in the CIA to be a legitimate target. He was to them someone who could be deprived of his freedom, probably his life as well, eventually, despite having done no wrong, and put in fear for his family's lives had he not acquiesced. The Agency needs to be called to account."

"Well, I'm sure all honest American citizens will wish you well with that task. But what about you, now, Blair? After you've finished with DC?"

"I'm not sure, Don. To be honest, I think it's time for me to disappear again. I don't have much stomach for staying around here, now Jim is gone. I think I'll just fade away into the background again. After all, life won't be up to much without the person who meant the most to me."

"Blair Sandburg, thank you for talking to us, and good luck."

"A pleasure, Don. Thank you for hearing me out."

Epilogue

Simon Banks stared down at the barren-looking wastes below and wondered once again why in hell he'd allowed Alec Summers to talk him into this flight. Oh, the plane was comfortable enough; a substantial Boeing from Anchorage and, as Alec had promised, only a six-hour journey in total after an early start from Cascade.

But Nome? Really? As they came into land, the blip on the horizon Simon had spotted a while back still seemed to be just that – a blip. He shook his head in disbelief at his gullibility.

Prize fishing, my ass.

"Yes, it is," Alec had insisted, perched on the edge of Simon's desk at Hargrove Hall and dangling the plane ticket in front of him. "Call it my treat. What's the point of being a trustafarian if I can't splurge out on my friends once in a while?"

"And you reckon the most inaccessible part of Alaska is a treat for your friend right here?"

"You'll love it! My contact has got a gap in his timetable just for you. You can even travel light, and hire the gear there. I promise, you won't be disappointed. I know you've got leave, your secretary told me. She also told me you need a break."

"Well, I'll remember to thank her for putting me in harm's way, here."

"Stop whining, old man! You've done fantastic work, you know that. The Foundation thinks you walk on water. State politicians are begging for your insights on criminology and police policy. You've made a huge success of this, though that was never in doubt. But you haven't had a break in four years. You can let go a while, you know. Your department can take the strain."

Simon knew he was griping for the sake of it. He really could do with a vacation; Alec was right, as he was about so many things. The Policing Futures Study had been the lifeline offered to him by Alec's Foundation after he had left the PD in fatigue and disgust, though it had soon become a labour of love. But however committed he was to it, the Study wasn't going to fall down because its leading light took a long weekend break. Still, he couldn't be seen to give up that easily.

"You know, when I let you talk me into heading this venture up, I didn't think it meant it gave you the right to push me around."

"Yeah, you did," Alec had grinned. "Now, I'm in town till tomorrow, so let me buy you dinner and I'll tell you more about it. And you can smoke that goddamn cigar at last."

"Yeah, you just give me the right reason, Alec, and I will."

And that had been that. Simon was on a flight to Nome, for a fishing holiday in a place that didn't appear to run fishing holidays, staying with someone he'd never met. The cigar was in the top pocket of his padded vest, and he sure wished airline regulations meant he could take it out and chew on it, right now.

As it was, he hauled it out as soon as he got landside in Nome's surprisingly bustling little airport and, chewing resolutely, gazed around for the guy he was meeting; Darwin Burger, Fishing Holiday Expert.

And Fishing Holiday Expert, my ass, as well, thought Simon, spotting him in the crowd at the barrier, a familiar broad grin on his face. The hair was short - very short - and pretty grey. Funnily enough, it meant the blue eyes in the tanned, weathered face were even more luminous. Dressed in overalls and a padded coat, the guy looked a little stockier than he had done when Simon had first met him, almost sixteen years before, but the changes were superficial. The essence of the man still remained.

He strode up to the exit and Darwin Burger, or rather Blair Sandburg, held out a hand.

"Mr Banks? Welcome to Nome."

They shook hands, and Simon gripped hard.

"So, what's the game? Do I know you, or what?"

Blair's grin got wider.

"Thanks for playing, Simon. Right now, let's continue the pretence, okay? Pretty soon we can give that up. No one really cares here. But you can let go now, actually."

Simon dropped his hand and they walked together out of the terminal, with Blair wheeling Simon's little case. A four-by-four was waiting in the small car park, and Blair swung the vehicle out of the airport and made for the rest of Nome which, by Simon's reckoning, wasn't a huge target in the first place. He kept staring at Blair.

"So, this is where you ended up?"

"Seems like it, huh? A little playfulness, really. Where in the world would anyone think to look for me? Most people would expect me to be in the Americas somewhere, or maybe South East Asia, getting in touch with remote peoples. So here was a fun choice."

"Fun?""

"It has its attractions, seriously. I work with the Inuquiap community, doing social and economic projects, but at the same time I've got my own studies into local legend and folklore. I've got a couple of papers out of it already, and I'm writing a book. Under a pseudonym, of course." He winked at Simon.

"Well, that'll suit you fine," observed Simon wryly. "And the fishing holidays?"

"No, that was Alec's idea to get you up here. Sorry. I can certainly take you fishing – there are real good spots. I'm hoping we can start to develop fishing tourism as well, but I haven't got that project off the ground yet. There really might be a chance for that, too, along with the eco-tourism that's already underway. There's great wildlife in this area, as well as great natural beauty. Plus, we get the end of the Iditerod dog race in the winter. And you know, the climate isn't as harsh as many places in Alaska. It's really quite balmy, as Alaska goes."

Blair took a turning that brought the car onto a route to bypass the city.

"You're going great guns with Alec's project, I hear. How's the world of academia?" He was grinning again.

"Surprisingly similar to the PD in its ruthlessness, I find." Simon paused. "Blair, I couldn't stay there, not after what happened to Jim. Not with how the PD was so willing to throw me to the wolves." Blair just nodded emphatically.

"You did the right thing, man. But no," he continued, glancing a little sheepishly at Simon. "No, as far as the fishing goes, to be honest, Alec and I were just looking for a good way to tempt

you to travel. I'm sorry, Simon, that it's taken so long. Still cagey about getting in touch with people, you see? I wanted to be sure the cover was firm here, and wouldn't attract any undue attention. Finally, it seemed like we could kick back a little. We're doing pretty well."

"We?" echoed Simon, suddenly sitting up in his seat and giving Blair a suspicious look.

"Oh, yeah, something I should explain. Not easy, this." Blair swung the car onto a road running along the shore, heading north away from the city.

"I'm with someone. Someone new," he said at last. Simon gritted his teeth.

"A man someone?" he managed finally.

Blair chuckled.

"Yeah, sure, a man someone, Simon."

"But Jim..."

"Yeah, I know, He's not been declared officially dead yet. But you know what the chances of finding him in the Bay are, don't you? As far as the cops and the CIA and the Feds are concerned, Jim Ellison is long gone, I'm afraid. Long gone. And they lost interest. Even the Agency, which promised to be righteous in the future anyway, after that Senate hearing." Blair sighed deeply. "It helps hugely that the government stiffs aren't likely to cause any more trouble. So, things are pretty relaxed here. But I'm still paranoid about cover, I know. Old habits die hard."

They were approaching a smaller group of buildings – another settlement along the shore with its own small harbour.

"As for Jim, well... the official thing won't be for some years. But you know, I have to keep on living, Simon. And this guy – you'll like him, I promise you – he knows that if ... if by some miracle, Jim Ellison comes back, then he's just going to fade right away. There's no issue about that."

"Oh," said Simon, aggrieved but not really sure why. So Blair had to move on – that was only natural, he supposed. But it seemed, to Simon, to be an offence to Jim's memory. Give it time, he told himself.

They carried on down the straight, bare road, the buildings getting closer, with land on one side running flat far away to low mountains, and on the other, a sparkling sea.

Not far out there, thought Simon, there's Russia. Now isn't that the weirdest thing? Though not as weird as being in Alaska with a man who's already died twice, disappeared twice, and is now on his umpteenth alias.

"And what about Naomi?" Simon said at last, for something to break the silence. The moment the words were uttered, he wanted to bite his tongue. Blair seemed unperturbed, merely shrugging slightly.

"No idea. Naomi and I were... well, it was all going wrong before we left the first time. After what she did to help Baxter... I've got no wish to see her again, and I have no qualms about it, either." Simon noticed how hard his voice had become, and then how it softened with his next words.

"William's been here, though. He likes it. Says it reminds him of Basic Training."

"William Ellison?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not? He comes quite often. He and I get along just fine, we always did. He's a great old guy. And frankly, no one in the world cares what an octogenarian does with his free time, so there's no risk of publicity."

"And he... I mean, he gets on with the new guy?" asked Simon, thinking that less than twenty years earlier it would have been a question he'd never have imagined contemplating, let alone actually asking.

"Oh yeah, everyone's cool. Look, here we are, and here he is now."

The four-by-four pulled up in a dirt quadrangle, a short distance from a low house grouped with a few outbuildings. There was a boat on the shoreline, up-turned, and a man was working on the hull.

"Need to be ready for the fishing!" said Blair with a grin. "Come on, stretch your legs, now."

Simon slipped out of the vehicle, and shivered immediately at the cold wind off the shining water. There were a few errant snowflakes whirling around, for all it was late June. He zipped his coat and shaded his eyes as the man on the beach straightened up and waved. Blair waved back.

"I'll grab your bag. You go down and say hello to Joe."

Simon gave Blair a pained look, and then focused on the man again. He was walking up the beach now, in long, easy strides, dressed in a heavy fleece jacket and with a wool hat on his head. His strong jaw was covered in a full but neat beard, and his smile was broad and familiar; it filled his blue, blue eyes and crinkled the tanned face at the corners.

Simon swung round to Blair.

"What the hell?"

Blair gave him a sheepish grin.

"It would take too long to explain right now. Let's just say we found out he can hold his breath really well. Really, really well."

"Well, I'll be..." breathed Simon, turning back to stare again at the approaching man. "You sonsabitches. You goddamn, obfuscating ..."

Still watching, he put out an arm and gave Blair a slap on the back that had him reeling.

"Get me some matches, you – Hamburger, Sandburger, whatever your name is. There's a cigar that needs to be smoked!"