



“Eye on Cascade”

*by Morgan Briarwood
illustrated by mella68*

If you shoot somebody in the head with a .45 every time you kill somebody, it becomes like your fingerprint, see? But if you strangle one and stab another and one you cut up, one you don't, then the police don't know what to do. They think you're four different people. What they really want, what makes their job so much easier, is a pattern. What they call a modus operandi. That's Latin. Bet you didn't know any Latin, did you, kid?

From Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer



Eye on Cascade blog

Post title: Murder in the Hood – 4 questions the police can't answer

Post date: 4 August 2009

Blog category: Retrospectives

Tags: unsolved crimes, murder, serial?

In January 2005, Manuel Lamarche was murdered in what police at the time described as an execution-style shooting. His body was discovered by the driver of a garbage truck, half-buried in snow on the sidewalk outside a storage unit in the downtown area.

Lamarche was a petty crook with previous convictions for burglary and vehicular theft. Police sources confirm he was also suspected of dealing in crack cocaine. Perhaps this is why the investigation into his death was so sloppy. He was a low-life caught in the territory of a rival gang – he should have expected to take a beating.

But Eye on Cascade has uncovered a number of unanswered questions about this unsolved murder.

- Why was this case dismissed as gang violence when the only sign of violence was the bullet that killed him? A typical gang execution would have begun with a beating.
- Why was no attention paid to the unusual murder weapon: a .45 caliber revolver. Regular readers take note: a revolver leaves behind no shell casings, making the weapon much more difficult for police to trace.
- Why was the bullet the only physical evidence ever logged?
- Why was no arrest ever made in this case?

Eye on Cascade put these questions to the original investigating officer, Lieutenant Joel Taggart of CPD Major Crimes division. For a full account of Eye on Cascade's investigation, [read our full report](#).

Next week Eye on Cascade throws the spotlight on an unsolved murder from 2005 – CPD forensics expert Ryan Frazer.

Shared by 1539 readers. Share this?

Comments (21)

Chapter 1

21 August 2009

He was a hunter. A predator stalking the city streets.

He had made twenty two kills since arriving in the city. Today's would be twenty three.

He knew exactly what he was going to do. His plans were meticulous, every detail, every contingency accounted for. Days of observation meant he knew the terrain. He knew the people he might encounter. He knew his prey.

The apartment building had tight security. There were closed-circuit cameras watching every entrance but one. That one was the basement entrance. It appeared to be covered by a camera, but he had noticed the minor differences that marked the camera as a dummy. It was nothing but a box with a flashing LED. After today, someone would regret the few bucks that had saved them.

There was no one within sight as he approached the entrance from the rear. It took him a matter of seconds to force the lock. He used a black cloth to clean the door of his fingerprints before moving into the building. His eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness. He crossed quickly to the stairwell and there he waited, listening. When he was sure there was no one nearby he began to climb the stairs.

Reaching the second floor he paused again. There was loud music coming from one of the apartments. Beneath that, he heard a key turning in a lock. He froze. A door opened and closed again. He closed his eyes, concentrating on what he could hear. The hall was empty.

The music was coming from her apartment. He reached her door and knocked loudly. A moment later he saw the flash of light as she looked through her peephole. Would she recognise him? It hardly mattered. He reached into his pocket and lifted his badge before the peephole. She opened the door. He invited himself in. She was so trusting. She had no idea she had just admitted her murderer.

He smiled as he spoke, his carefully prepared words allaying any suspicion. He followed her into the apartment. She was wearing jeans and an old, threadbare sweater – a far cry from her usual smart suits and tailored dresses. Comfort clothing. Her long hair was damp and he could smell shampoo and soap. There was another, stronger scent. As they entered her living room he identified it as acetone and nail polish.

"Ms Roca, I need to ask you about the Eye on Cascade blog," he said.

She shrugged. "I read it."

"You *write* it, Ms Roca. Let's not waste time. You told my colleague as much."

She sat down and picked up the nail polish bottle. "I hope you don't mind. I have a date tonight."

"I don't mind. You recently posted an article about the murder of Mannie Lamarche."

She started to paint her nails, but she kept glancing at him as she worked. "That's not a question," she pointed out.

"You implied the police did an intentionally sloppy job of the investigation. I'm not here to debate the issue, but the evidence presented in your article didn't really support that conclusion. I want to know if there's more you didn't publish."

"Why?"

"It's still an open case." True, but not why he cared what she had.

She turned away from him, reaching for the polish bottle to cap it. It was the perfect opportunity, and he took it. He drew the gun from the holster at his back and reversed it quickly. He struck her hard, once, on the back of her skull. She fell.

He holstered the gun. She was unconscious, but breathing. He lifted her body easily in his arms and laid her on the couch. He touched her cheek gently. She was so young...it was a shame she had to die. He did find this part unpleasant, but it was necessary. He knew exactly where to place his hands to cut off her air most efficiently. She died without regaining consciousness.

His purpose achieved, he arranged her body with care. He removed her jeans and tossed them into a corner of the room. He ripped her sweater along the seam. Her head rested on the arm of the couch, blood from her head-wound staining the white fabric. He carefully opened her eyes and drew a few strands of her hair over her face.

He stood back and studied his work, then he shifted her slightly, arranging her legs so one dangled over the side of the couch. He lifted hand, raised the arm high, then let the limb fall. Much better. If he walked in to this crime scene without knowing what happened he would think *sexual assault* or maybe *sex-games-gone-bad*.

He checked his watch. There was time. Leaving the girl where she lay, he headed into the bedrooms, located hers and found the laptop. He booted it up. Not even password protected. He opened the browser and found the Eye on Cascade blog. That was password-protected but her laptop automatically logged him in. He smiled to himself and looked for future postings. He deleted all of them without touching the live blog, then searched the hard drive. He deleted several more files, turned the laptop off and searched the rest of the room quickly.

Finally he drew a pair of latex gloves from his pocket, together with some other tools. He moved methodically through the apartment, erasing not only prints but every trace of his presence. He checked everywhere he had been carefully. He went to the CD player and put her disc on repeat before he left the same way that he came, silently. Her music played on.

No trace. No witnesses. No problem.

Twenty three.

Blair parked his car in the alley beside Tania's apartment building. He still couldn't believe she agreed to a date; Tania was gorgeous, sophisticated and rich: he had no idea why she wanted to go out with him, but he wasn't going to question his luck. Nervously, Blair checked his hair in the mirror before he left the car. He had slicked his wild curls back into a ponytail; as close as he could get to a respectable look. He wanted to make a good impression tonight.

He locked the car and headed around the corner to her building. He pushed the buzzer for Tania's apartment and waited, but there was no answer. Blair checked his watch. It was 7:15, exactly the time they had agreed he would pick her up. Blair pushed the buzzer again.

A middle aged couple came up to the door. The man punched in an entry code and turned to Blair as he opened the door. "Trying to get in?" he asked, his tone friendly.

"I'm looking for Tania Roca in 14. We're supposed to go out, but she's not answering."

The woman smiled. "Oh, Tania plays her stereo so loudly she can't possibly hear the door. Come on in – you'll have better luck if you knock her door upstairs."

"Thanks." Blair returned the smile and followed them into the building. He rode with the couple in the elevator up to Tania's floor. Stepping out of the elevator, he heard music: Lady Gaga's *Fame*. Maybe Tania had stood him up...

Reaching Tania's door, Blair knocked firmly. The door opened a crack as he touched it. The hallway within was dark.

Beginning to feel uneasy, Blair pushed the door open. "Tania?" he called.

There was only silence. Blair walked across the threshold. "Tania? Are you in here?" He found a light switch and turned it on. The door on his left was the kitchen and it was empty. Ahead, doors led to the bathroom and living room. Feeling like an intruder, he walked toward the living room, calling her name again.

And then he saw her.

For a moment, Blair froze in the doorway. She was lying on her couch. Her hair – the lovely, rich hair he always wanted to touch – was a tangled mess. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. Her sweater was torn. Even before he turned on the light, Blair knew she was dead. He fumbled for the light switch and as the overhead bulb flared to life it illuminated Tania's body. She was beautiful in life. Death was ugly. Blair saw a red stain on the arm of the couch and dark bruises at her throat.

From the CD player, Lady Gaga wondered why she liked it so rough.

"Oh, my god." Acid burned the back of his throat and Blair fell to his knees, retching. Somehow, he managed not to throw up. Not trusting himself to stand, he crawled backward until he hit the doorframe and could go no further. He couldn't take his eyes from her. One of her hands hung down limply, her fingernails freshly polished. The bottle of nail polish stood open on the table, as if she would get up any moment to put it away.

Telephone...where was her phone? Regaining some focus, Blair used the doorframe to drag himself up and looked around. He found the phone mounted on the wall a short distance from the door. His hands shaking, Blair picked it up and dialed 911.

The rest of the evening was one long nightmare.

When he heard his story, the 911 operator dispatched an ambulance and instructed Blair to attempt CPR. But Blair could see that Tania was dead. Her body was cold when he touched her. He told the operator as much and she said police were on the way. The cops showed up half a minute ahead of the paramedics. One of the uniformed police ushered Blair into the small kitchen and told him to stay there. Blair had the distinct impression that it wasn't the kind of request that came with options. As instructed, he waited in Tania's kitchen, trying to hold himself together, listening to the people trooping in and out of the apartment, to cops talking to each other over her body as if this happened every day. Perhaps it did, for them.

Finally, a detective showed up. By then Blair was pacing the small kitchen, unconsciously hugging himself. He had become familiar with every crack in the ceiling, every tile on the floor. It felt like a prison cell. He heard a pointed cough and stopped pacing, turning to face the man in the doorway.

"Mr Sandburg?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"I'm Detective Ellison. I'm sorry you've been kept waiting so long."

Ellison's blue eyes were kind, defusing some of Blair's agitation. "That's...okay," he answered. Ellison...the name was naggingly familiar.

"I only have a couple of questions, Mr Sandburg, and then you can go home if you like. The victim was a friend of yours?"

Blair's mouth was dry. He swallowed a few times to get saliva running. "Um...yes. A friend."

"Girlfriend?"

"Not exactly. We were going on a date tonight. It would have been the first."

Ellison nodded. "Do you know if she has a roommate? There are two bedrooms."

"Her brother. Tania...um, she told me he's out of town, but I don't know where or when he's due back. His name is Matt – Mateo Roca."

"Good." Ellison made a note. "What time did you get here tonight, Mr Sandburg?"

"Seven fifteen. I...I'm sure of the time because I checked my watch when I was at the door."

"That's very helpful, thank you. I realise this is difficult for you, but can you tell me exactly what happened when you got here? Take your time."

Blair swallowed again. "I buzzed her from the door downstairs, but she didn't answer..." More collected, now, Blair explained to the detective how he found Tania's body.

Ellison took notes occasionally as Blair talked. He looked up when Blair finished. "Where were you earlier today?" he asked.

Blair's stomach turned over. They couldn't think he had anything to do with this...could they? "Uh...I was at the university until five. I'm a grad student there. Then I went home to change."

"You live with anyone?"

Blair managed a nervous smile. "You don't have to be subtle, Detective. You want to know if I have an alibi."

Ellison nodded. "You're not a suspect, Sandburg, not at this stage. It will be helpful if we can eliminate you from our inquiries right away. So, do you have an alibi?"

"I was taking a seminar at Rainier from two until four, and then I had a meeting with Professor Stoddard about my doctoral thesis. But I live alone, so from five onwards, no."

"The couple you mentioned will be able to verify your arrival here, so that should cover it. That's all I need for now. I'd like you to come in to the department tomorrow morning and make a more detailed report. Is that okay?"

Blair nodded. "Sure."

"Good." Ellison reached into a pocket. "In the meantime, if you think of anything that might be important, give me a call." He held a card out to Blair.

Blair took it. "I will." His wallet was in his back pocket; he found his hands shaking as he put Ellison's card away.

"Then you're free to go." Ellison looked at him with sudden concern. "Are you okay? I can have someone drive you home if you're a bit shaky."

"Thanks, but...I'm good, man."

5 August 2009 (Two Weeks Earlier)

The day Blair met Tania Roca was also the day he almost broke his neck.

Blair's office at Rainier University doubled as a storage room for the anthropology department; truthfully the artefacts had been there long before Blair moved in. He enjoyed having this space: it was cool working surrounded by artefacts. Unfortunately, it tended to encourage his bad habits; his office existed as a kind of organised chaos; Blair knew how to find everything, but no one else looking around his room would see anything but mess. He had old books stacked together with artefacts, students' papers haphazardly collected together with his own notes and books piled on the floor.

On that day, Blair made one of his regular futile attempts to tidy up. He had separated the papers on his desk into almost neat piles, and had moved on to the various artefacts he held, placing them carefully on newly cleared shelves. Engrossed in the task, Blair didn't even notice the first knock on his door. The second was louder and he called "Come in!" without looking around.

He couldn't look around. At that moment he was perched on a chair, reaching up to the topmost shelf. He carefully slid the bowl he was holding onto the shelf then twisted around to see who was there. As he did so, he lost his balance. The chair tipped over beneath him and Blair reached for the shelf, realised he'd bring it down on top of him and let go, crashing to the floor.

He came up laughing. "Ouch." He peered over the desk. "Oh, hi, Jack."

"Are you okay?" Jack Kelso asked him. He was stuck in the doorway: Blair's carefully organised piles of books and paper didn't leave room for Jack's wheelchair.

"I'll live." Blair rubbed his butt ruefully, but he wasn't badly hurt. Just bruised. He edged around the desk and started clearing a path for Jack. "We don't see you down here often, man."

"I do find the stairs a challenge. I came down in the freight elevator."

"What can I do for you?"

"Do you know Tania Roca? She teaches Media and Culture. Does some freelance journalism."

Blair shook his head, though the name was familiar. "No...oh, wait a minute. I read her paper on the rise of citizen journalism and social media. I don't think we've met."

Jack grinned. "Oh, you'd remember her if you had." He rolled forward as Blair shifted the last stack out of the wheelchair's path. "Tania and I worked together last year when she wrote a story on corruption in the courts," Jack explained. "Now she's working on a new project and she

came to me for help again. I think we need an unbiased opinion, and you seemed a good choice.”

“Me?” Blair leaned back against his desk but straightened up quickly, making a mental note not to do that with a bruised ass. “What do I know about criminology or corruption?”

Kelso grinned. “That's the point. Tania and I – we're both trained to be paranoid. We need someone to look over what she's found and tell us whether we're being *too* paranoid.”

Blair nodded. “Okay. Where and when?”

“My office. Whenever you're ready.”

Blair followed Jack into the office. Tania was sitting at Jack's desk with a folder open in front of her, writing in a notebook. She was biting her lip in concentration: something Blair would come to recognise as a sign she was utterly engrossed in her work. She looked up as they entered, but apparently saw only Jack at first.

“This could be another one, Jack,” she began. Then she saw Blair.

And smiled.

Blair fell instantly in lust.

Tania Roca was way out of his league. A few years his senior, she was rich, sophisticated and successful. She had lovely, Asian features, porcelain skin and shining dark hair that begged to be touched. The smile transformed her from serious and mildly pretty to stunningly beautiful.

“Tan, this is Blair Sandburg,” Jack said, oblivious to the thunderbolt hitting Blair.

“Hi, Blair,” she said.

Blair offered his best smile. “Hi. I'm, uh, pleased to meet you. I read your exposé last year. That was brave work.”

“Thank you.”

If the first smile hadn't done it, the second certainly would have. Blair had to clear his throat to speak again. “Um...Jack said you wanted help with a story or investigation...?”

Her eyes flicked to Kelso who said, “I didn't tell him anything.”

Tania looked back to Blair, her expression serious again. “Before I explain, Blair, this information cannot leave this room. If you can't agree to that...”

"I agree," Blair answered at once. He would have promised anything to spend a little more time with her. "You want me to sign something?"

She smiled her amazing smile again. "Jack vouches for you. That's good enough."

"Then how can I help?"

"I'm working on a story about unsolved crimes in Cascade; I thought I might uncover mob links, like I did last year with the court exposé. But I think I've found something else." She took a deep breath, setting her notebook aside as she rose from Jack's desk. "I've shown Jack my files, but Jack doesn't trust his own judgement."

"Not true!" Kelso protested. He moved further into the room, positioning his wheelchair behind the vacated desk. "It's just that so many years with the CIA makes me..."

"Paranoid?" Blair put in, using Jack's word.

"...Makes me look for the worst case scenario. Like Tania – " he gave her a meaningful look " – I could be seeing what I expect to see, instead of what is. That's where you come in, Blair. You know how to look for evidence in unusual places and you have a creative mind. I think...we think that if you see the same thing we do, it will prove Tania is on to something."

Tania beckoned Blair over and opened the file she was holding. "I have a contact in the police department who got me some of this information. The rest is public record. This lists all of the unsolved murders in Cascade since 2001. Just so you know, the local detection rate for murder is about average for a city this size. The numbers look bad but the cops are doing a good job."

"Okay..." Blair glanced down the list. "This was in the *Eye on Cascade*."

"You read *Eye on Cascade*?"

Blair shrugged. "Not religiously. I do follow it, though. Is that where you're getting this?"

"Not exactly. I write *Eye on Cascade*." She added quickly, "There's a reason it's anonymous, Blair. Don't tell anyone."

Blair felt an odd thrill. It was silly, but knowing the secret made this feel like a spy thriller. Tania was certainly beautiful enough to be the star... *Focus, Sandburg. She wants your help, not your dick.*

"I've gone through the list and eliminated any that may have been accidental deaths: hit-and-runs and suchlike. I've also eliminated cases the police have down as gang or drug related. The remaining case notes are in this file." Tania turned the page. "It might take you a while to read all this and I don't want to prejudice you."

"So you want me to read it, and what? Just tell you if I see anything odd?"

Kelso nodded. "Exactly."

"Okay." Blair took the file from Tania and settled down to read.

The file made for disturbing reading. Tania didn't have the full case notes, just a summary of each death. All of them had some details blacked out: names of suspects and witnesses, that sort of thing. The names of the victims and the officers who worked on each case were uncensored. Blair had never realised how many people were killed in Cascade every year.

As he read through the notes, he started categorising them in his mind. So many were shot, so many stabbed and so on. Some cases seemed to be sex crimes: women raped and killed, others were robberies, and others seemed utterly senseless. There were no domestic cases and for a while that confused him until he realised that domestic murders, by definition, didn't go unsolved. When one partner kills another, police know who did it.

"I don't know," Blair admitted to them when he'd finished reading. "It's scary as hell, man, seeing how many of them seem so random, but if you two see some pattern in all this...I don't see it."

Tania and Kelso exchanged a glance.

Kelso turned back to Blair, his expression grim. "You just did."

"Did what?" Blair protested. "Randomness isn't a pattern – that's a mathematical impossibility."

Jack smiled. "Mathematically, you're correct, but we aren't analysing this mathematically."

"Randomness can't be a pattern," Tania agreed, "but in this case the postulate needs further clarification. You chose the word random, Blair. What did you mean?"

Blair frowned. "Well...in a detective story there's always a reason the killer wanted the victim dead. Even if it's not a good reason, you find the motive and that leads to the killer. Right?"

"Right, but this isn't fiction."

"No, but the same principle should apply. We don't live in an anarchy. With the exception of tragedies like the kid who opens fire in the school canteen, or acts of terrorism, people don't just pick someone off the street and murder them. But that's what a lot of those cases look like. There's no reason for it – they're just dead."

Tania nodded. "And it's that quality that's the pattern, because it's *not* mathematically random, Blair. It's a symptom."

"Of what? A sick society?"

"A serial killer."

21 August 2009

It was almost midnight when Jim finally reached home. He bolted the door, shutting the world out of the loft. He stripped off his coat and hung it up, taking a deep breath.

He remembered the girl's body, dark hair partially covering her face, bruises on her wrists and throat, her sweater torn. He remembered the smell of her nail polish, the sparkle of the earrings she'd laid out in her bedroom. A normal girl getting ready for a date. She had everything to live for, and now she was dead.

He shook his head. Where was his detachment now?

He headed into the shower, stripping his clothing off as he went. The hot water beating against his skin relaxed him, helping him to put the memory back where it belonged. It was only because he was tired. He stepped out of the shower and pulled on a robe. He walked out of the bathroom and hesitated in the doorway, surveying his living space.

Tania Roca. Ellison was vaguely familiar with her work as a journalist. It was only a few days before that he, and several friends, had been talking about her, right here in this room.

14 August 2009 (One Week Earlier)

It was one of those rare evenings when they all managed to get the same evening off, and even better, it was Fight Friday. It was Jim's turn to play host so the other cops gathered at the loft to watch the boxing, share beer and junk food and generally relax.

The fight was over – Jim lost his bet but he didn't care. He was laughing along with everyone else as they bantered.

After a while the conversation turned naturally to work. Jim was in the kitchen getting more beer from the refrigerator when he heard Taggart ask Brown something about the Lamarche case. The question got Jim's attention because as far as he knew the case was...well, not closed, because they'd never solved it, but at least shelved. He headed back to the others.

"That's an old case, Joel," Jim said. "Why bring it up now?"

"It came up in a conversation today," Taggart answered.

"What were you doing discussing a case outside the office?" Simon asked him.

Taggart looked at his empty beer bottle then set it down. "I didn't discuss it. I had a meeting with someone today: a journalist. Tania Roca."

"You met with a journalist," Simon repeated.

Brown recognised the name. "Hey, she's the one who wrote those articles about the DA's office last year. She helped expose Hal Fazzino, right?"

"That's the one," Taggart confirmed. "Turns out she writes the *Eye on Cascade* blog, too."

"That crappy crime blog?" Brown snorted.

"It's not that crappy," Jim said mildly. "The current stuff is good. It's the so-called retrospectives that belong to the tin-hat brigade."

"What did you tell her, Joel?" Simon asked, his tone irritated.

"I didn't tell her anything. *She* told *me*. She asked for a quote, but I just said I couldn't comment on open cases."

"She told you what?" Simon rolled a cigar between his fingers, frowning.

"She had a list of our unsolved cases – maybe ten of them – that she thinks are linked in some way. Lamarche was one of them."

"Linked how?" Jim asked.

"She didn't come right out and say it, but I got the impression she thinks there's a cover up going on."

"Ridiculous," Simon declared.

Jim nodded agreement. "Sounds like she's just fishing for a new scandal. She won't find one in our department."

Simon nodded grimly. "Let's hope – " He broke off as his cellphone interrupted. He stood, walking away from the group as he answered the phone. "Banks. Yes...just a moment." Simon glanced back to the others.

The look let Jim know Simon didn't want his call overheard, and he nodded toward the balcony. Simon could talk privately out there.

Simon took the hint, speaking quietly into the phone as he walked out onto the balcony. Jim, respecting his friend's privacy, didn't try to listen.

Moments later Simon was back. "Sorry, guys, I'm going to have to call it a night."

"Trouble, Simon?" Jim asked.

Simon shook his head, but his was already reaching for his coat. "Personal. Thanks for the beer, Jim." He hurried out of the door.

Jim glanced at Taggert, but decided against reviving the conversation. "Anyone want more beer?" he offered.

22 August 2009, 1:00 am

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Jim's window gave him a view of the city streets below. Reflections of lights filled the room, casting coloured shadows on the walls. He could hear cars passing by. This late at night, the streets of Cascade belonged to the criminals: the prostitutes and pimps, the drug dealers and gangs, the scum of the city he was sworn to protect.

Jim opened the bedside drawer and picked up the worn photograph. It was the only one he still kept of her: he had destroyed the others. In the photograph, taken at one of the formal police dinners they attended every year, Jim wore a tuxedo and she wore a deep green dress. The green brought out her hazel eyes and the fiery highlights of her hair. She was holding a champagne glass and the ring Jim had given her sparkled on her finger.

Less than a month after this photograph was taken, she had been dead.

He touched her smiling face with his fingertips, but a photograph was a poor substitute for the memory of her soft skin under his hands, the scent of her perfume. Jim sat there for a long time, reliving his memories.

Finally, Jim placed the photograph on his nightstand, propped up next to his gun. He lay down in his bed and tried to sleep.

Chapter 2

22 August 2009

The morgue was possibly Jim's least favourite place in the entire world.

He glanced through the glass pane in the door and saw Dan was still at work. Jim recognised Tania Roca's body on the table. The green morgue sheets covered most of her pale body. Her lovely hair was gathered into a rough knot to reveal her face and neck. The bruises at her throat stood out starkly.

Jim frowned; he had hoped to avoid watching the autopsy. But he was there now. He knocked on the glass. Dan looked up, saw Jim there and beckoned him in.

Jim entered, trying to ignore the smell in the room. It wasn't bad, not really, but it always seemed to hit him hard in here. "Morning, Dan. Give me some good news."

Dan set down the instrument he was holding and stripped off his latex gloves. "I'm afraid there's not much good here, Jim."

Great. "What have you got?"

"Wrongful death."

"Brilliant, Sherlock. Now tell me what I don't know."

"Gee, someone got out of bed on the wrong side this morning."

"Dan."

"Sorry." Dan picked up a clipboard. "Toxicology won't be back for a while but I'm betting she's clean. She's a fit, healthy young woman. No sign of illness or recent injury prior to death."

"How did she die?"

"Well, there's no evidence of rape or other sexual assault, despite the torn clothing. No evidence of consensual sex, either. No bruising except at her throat, no ligature marks, no lacerations except the blow to her head. Her killer struck her at the base of her skull with a blunt instrument. Here, look..."

Dan turned the body's head slightly. Jim moved closer, leaning in reluctantly to see what Dan was pointing out.

"The blow was either very lucky or very precise," Dan explained. "Several fragments of bone were driven into her brain. She lost consciousness very quickly and would have been dead

within minutes. But her killer didn't wait for that. He made certain of her by strangling her to death. So the actual cause of death was asphyxiation."

"Tell me about the murder weapon."

"Blunt instrument. I haven't found fragments so it's probably made of metal. I've taken samples for particulates but you know how long that will take. Right now I'd go with crowbar or hammer from the shape. It might even be the butt of a gun."

Jim shook his head. "A gun doesn't make sense. This was a premeditated murder; if he had a gun, why not shoot her?"

Dan grinned at him. "That's your problem, detective. I just call 'em as I see 'em."

"So, crowbar or hammer," Jim repeated. Then he frowned. "Wait a moment. She was struck from behind, right?"

"Yep. From the angle of the blow he's right handed..."

Jim interrupted, not wanting to lose his train of thought. "So he hits her from behind, she falls, she'd fall on her face, wouldn't she?"

"If she was standing at the time, yes."

"But the bruises on her throat came from the front. So he turned her over before strangling her?"

"Probably."

"Then there should have been blood on the carpet. We didn't find any."

Dan nodded. "I remember the CSU photos. You'll have to let me think that one over, but my first guess would be he lifted her onto the couch. If that's the case, he could have bloodied his clothing."

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear."

Dan went on, "The bruises on her neck are very clear: there's a clean imprint of each finger, look." He held his hand against the body's neck. "The killer's hand span is greater than mine, see? And the bruises are dark so he applied a lot of pressure. And look at this...he crushed her windpipe with his thumbs. He knew exactly where to apply pressure."

"You make it sound like a professional job," Jim commented uneasily.

"Again, that's your department, though as you just pointed out, a pro would use a gun. But I'll bet you a month's salary that this guy has killed before. A lot. He knows what he's doing."

"Then I need to know about *him*. You've got a handprint, he's right handed. Anything else?"

"Tall...at least six feet tall, based on the angle of the blow relative to her height. My guess is six-two. Physically powerful. As far as physical evidence goes, all of the blood is hers. There were no hairs or clothing fibres. Nothing under her fingernails. I do have a partial print, but it won't be enough to ID your perp."

"A print? Where?"

"Would you believe in her nail polish?" Dan lifted the sheet away from one of her hands. "There are carpet fibres in the polish on two of her fingers, indicating it was still wet when she was killed. And here..." he showed Jim "...there's an impression of a finger in the polish. It's only about a third of the fingertip and it's a bit smudged, but it's definitely not her print."

Jim straightened. "It doesn't look clear enough to stand up in court, but it's a great start. We can see if it matches anyone on file, at least. Thanks, Dan. I know you've done your best. When can I have your preliminary report?"

"The basic paperwork you'll have as soon as Sherry's finished typing. The rest by tomorrow morning if you need it urgently. Otherwise I'll send it on when I get the toxicology. I do want to run a few more tests, though. She might have more to tell us."

"Okay, good. Whenever you're ready, Dan. If you find anything else that's significant, call me right away."

"Will do, detective."

Half an hour later, Jim had to admit to Simon that he had very little to go on.

Jim closed the crime scene report, looking up at his boss. "Someone just walked into her apartment and killed her. Dan Wolf confirmed there was no rape. There was no robbery – "

"And no suspects," Simon finished for him.

"I'm afraid not. I've requested the CCTV tapes from the victim's apartment building. They've got every entrance covered, so that should give us a place to start. There was no forced entry, Simon, and the apartment was very tidy. She let her killer in. It has to be someone she knew."

"That's the second time you've said the place was tidy. Too tidy? Could there have been a struggle and the killer cleaned the place up?"

Jim shrugged. "It's possible. Likely, even, but a real struggle leaves signs, no matter how carefully you clean up. Scuff marks in the carpet, something broken or scratched...either she was killed elsewhere, which seems unlikely, or she let someone in and was taken by surprise. No one in the building saw or heard anything."

Simon nodded. "So what's your next move, Jim?"

"The man who found her body and called us was..." Jim glanced at his notes, "...Blair Sandburg, a colleague of the victim at Rainier University. He's due in later and I'm hoping he can shed some light on the situation. I'm also going to talk to her neighbours again. Maybe I can shake something loose. I'll let you know if anything turns up."

"Good. Tania Roca wrote that exposé on the DA's office last year – we were talking about it a few nights ago, if you remember."

"I remember," Jim said. "I hadn't realised it was the same woman."

"Well, that article could have made her a few enemies. The kind who might kill to get her out of the way. Better check out the connection."

Jim stood and gathered up the pathologist's report. "I'll get on it."

Blair looked around the interview room. The walls were uniformly grey. The door stood ajar and he heard the indistinct voices of people working. He had no idea what he was going to say. He had been thinking about it all night. The problem was Blair didn't know much.

He looked up as Detective Ellison entered the room. Blair remembered now why Ellison's name had been familiar. He was the one whom the army rescued from the jungle a few years ago. Blair dug the articles out of archive when he started searching for a modern sentinel: Hero Survives Jungle Ordeal. Blair wondered at the time if Ellison might be what he was looking for: the articles hinted at some odd sensory experience. That wasn't important now.

Tania was dead. That was important.

And Blair was sitting here wondering if he was about to lie to a cop.

Ellison took a seat opposite Blair. "Thanks for coming. I'd like to record our conversation this morning, if you have no objection."

"I don't mind," Blair answered. He watched Ellison slide a tape into a machine and start it. "Detective Ellison...how did she die?"

Ellison hesitated. "I can't give out information about an ongoing investigation. I'm sorry." He met Blair's eyes and Blair saw the same kindness in them he had noticed the night before. Ellison added, "It was quick, Sandburg, she wouldn't have felt much pain. That's all I can tell you."

"Thanks, man. That helps."

"I'd like to go over what you told me last night. You reached the building at seven fifteen..."

Blair told his story again. He answered questions.

"Did she have any enemies that you know of? Ex-boyfriend, maybe?"

Blair shook his head. "Look, man, we were just in the getting-to-know-you phase. If she had an ex who was trouble, she never mentioned it to me. As far as I know, she didn't have any enemies."

"She certainly didn't make many friends at the DA's office last year," Ellison told him.

Blair hadn't thought of that. He nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Like I said, I didn't know her as well as I wanted to."

"So maybe her work did make her a few enemies. Do you know if she was working on a story at the time of her death? We found some books and notes in her apartment but it didn't tell us much."

And there it was. The question Blair had been hoping to avoid. He couldn't shake the feeling that it was a really, really bad idea to tell a cop that Tania was the *Eye on Cascade*. Her blog was highly critical of the authorities and the latest series implied that Cascade PD was at best lazy, at worst corrupt. On the other hand, lying to the cops seemed an even worse idea, especially if there was a connection between her research and her murder.

"There was something." Blair looked up into Ellison's eyes. *I sure hope I can trust you, man...* "I don't know exactly what Tania was writing. Her investigation had something to do with Cascade PD. She had statistics about unsolved crimes, especially murder." He hesitated, then added, "I don't know the details." That last was only half-true.

"Did anyone?" Ellison pressed.

"I don't think she told anyone all of it. Um...you could talk to Jack Kelso at the university. She was consulting with him about part of her research." Blair felt bad, dumping the load on Jack. On the other hand, Jack had a lot of experience dealing with corrupt cops. Blair didn't.

"I will. Thanks."

26 August 2009

Statistically, a person is most likely to be murdered by someone close to them. A jealous partner. A business disagreement blown way out of proportion. Past resentments between family members or neighbours that finally reach boiling point. Sometimes it is justified: an abused wife who finally snaps and kills her husband, for example. But the justified homicides are the easy ones to solve. They require minimal police work because the perpetrator usually confesses quickly when questioned.

That seemed the most likely outcome in Tania Roca's case, but Jim still had no suspects. There was no psycho ex, no family member with a grudge. Jim was forced to look at her professional, instead of her personal life. He had no doubt her exposé articles had gained her some enemies, but those leads turned out to be dead ends, too. Everyone implicated by those articles was in jail already.

Could someone have arranged a hit? Maybe from inside prison? It was unlikely but not impossible. If Tania had been shot Jim would have treated this as a professional hit, but pros don't strangle their targets. That left him with nothing to go on except the forensics, and they had no DNA, no fibres or CCTV. Only that partial fingerprint that wasn't even enough to run for a match.

Tania's funeral was an opportunity for Jim to observe those people who were close to her. From his truck, he watched the people gathered at the graveside. He could observe without intruding.

Blair Sandburg was there, wearing a black turtleneck and jacket rather than the traditional suit and tie. He carried a white rose in his hand. Very romantic. The kid must have really been smitten.

There were others Jim recognised as her colleagues from the university or her newspaper; though she was technically a freelance journalist nearly all of her articles were published by the same paper: the *Cascade Tribune*. Jim had interviewed some of them; if anyone knew the details of her current investigation, they weren't admitting it. He watched them carefully, memorising each face.

The faces he didn't recognise were probably Tania's family. Jim had met her parents when he interviewed them about her death. Now that was part of his job he really disliked: questioning grieving parents about their dead child's lifestyle. They were an oddly mismatched couple: Italian-American father, Chinese mother. Anthony Roca owned a successful chain of restaurants; he was probably worth a couple of million. The family was a big one: six children, including Tania. Not all of them were at the funeral.

The ceremony was drawing to a close. Jim watched the mother step forward to throw flowers into the freshly-dug grave. Others followed, one by one.

A few minutes later the group broke up. Jim watched a young man approach Sandburg. He wished he could hear their conversation, but of course it was impossible from his distance. Impossible...yet the moment Jim thought it he heard:

"...me know. I mean that, man."

"There might be something...but I can't talk about it here. Not today."

"No problem. Why don't you call me tomorrow? Here..."

Jim saw Sandburg hand over what he assumed was a business card. As the young man took it his fingers brushed Sandburg's lightly. It was a subtle moment but Jim made a mental note: any information might be useful later.

A car horn honked, the sound ripping into his skull. Jim clapped his hands over his ears, looking around wildly for the source of the sound. Shit, it sounded right on top of him! But there was nothing nearby. He looked back to where Sandburg had been standing.

Only Tania's father remained, now, alone at the graveside. He stood there for a long time, gazing down at the ground. Finally he moved away and rejoined his family.

27 August 2009

Blair looked up at the apartment building. He drew his jacket closer around him, though it wasn't all that cold. He hadn't thought he would be back here so soon...or ever.

He shook off his reluctance and pushed the buzzer for apartment 14. If no one answered he was going to walk away. And no doubt have nightmares for weeks.

Fortunately, Matt answered the buzzer quickly. "Hello?"

"It's Blair Sandburg."

"Great, come on up." The door pinged and Blair pushed it open. At least he knew Matt was alive up there...

When he reached the apartment, he found Matt waiting for him in the doorway. "Hi, Blair. Thanks for coming." Matt led the way into the apartment. He looked a lot like his sister: the same lush, dark hair, though on Matt it was cut much shorter. They had the same eyes, too.

Blair followed Matt into the living room, and stopped. He couldn't remember exactly what the room looked like last time he stood in this spot. He only remembered...

Her hair – the lovely, rich hair he always wanted to touch – was a tangled mess. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. One of her hands hung down limply, her fingernails freshly polished.

Blair swallowed, hard, but he couldn't put the memory aside. He remembered the arm of the couch stained with her blood. There was a throw-rug covering it now; Blair had an urge to move the throw, find out if the stain was still there.

Matt turned to look at him sympathetically. "I know it's not easy for you to be here. Let's talk in my room, okay?"

Blair forced a smile. "Okay, sure."

"Are you okay?"

"No, man, I'm not." Blair took a deep breath, pulling himself together. "God, I'm sorry. If being here is hard for me, I can't imagine how you're feeling..."

"Unreal, mostly. By the time I got home Dad had cleaned the place up. I miss Tania..." He ran a hand through his thick hair. "I really do. But being here doesn't make it worse." Matt opened the bedroom door and waved Blair in ahead of him. "Make yourself comfortable."

There were no chairs, so Blair sat down on the bed. It was a king-size, made up with black cotton sheets and duvet. He ran his hand across the duvet cover: it was heavy cotton, high quality stuff. It spoke of unpretentious wealth, and that reminded him of Tania.

"Here," Matt said, fishing something out of a drawer, "this is what I wanted to show you." He handed Blair a slim, black notebook. "When Tania was working on a story she always kept a diary on paper. She had notes online, too, but she always said writing it down helped her to keep things...straight."

Matt placed an odd emphasis on that last word and it made Blair smile. He had already figured out Matt was gay. He had an interesting way of dropping the subtlest of hints into conversation. Was he waiting for Blair to let him know he'd picked up on it? Blair flashed a quick grin and took the diary from Matt. He opened it and turned pages.

Jan 7. 10 am. Jack K.

Jan 7. 12.30 pm. Jack K./Blair Sandburg.

Blair blinked dust out of his eyes and turned the page.

Jan 9. Phone A. Cage ref L K T

It clearly meant something to Tania, but it was indecipherable to Blair. He turned the page again.

Jan 14. 11 am. Int Det Taggart Maj. Crimes.

Blair stared at Matt. "She talked to a detective about this story? A cop?"

Matt nodded. He looked troubled.

"You're not thinking..." Blair began.

"I honestly don't know. But it scares me, Blair. I don't know much about where she was heading with this blog series, but I know she was going to sling a lot of mud at the police. She interviewed a detective...and a week later she was dead." He sat down beside Blair. "I was hoping you could tell me something. Or maybe discover something."

Blair closed the diary. "Whoa, man. Time out, okay? Just what are you asking?"

"I know she consulted you. So you must know more than I do about this..."

Blair reached out, resting his hand on Matt's arm comfortingly. "Matt, I know how helpless you must feel. But the cops are investigating. They'll find whoever killed her. You really should show this diary to Detective Ellison."

"What if the cops are somehow involved?"

"That's crazy, man."

"Is it?"

Was it? Blair remembered Tania's crime reports and knew that it was very possible her murder would not be solved. He also remembered, all too clearly, Tania's theory about several apparently motiveless murders in Cascade. He sighed. "Tania showed me some police files. Unsolved murder cases. She thought there might be evidence of a link between them, but she never told me exactly what she was thinking."

Matt blinked. "Oh, god."

"She said that if she could see it, the cops were idiots if they hadn't."

"Tan thought there was a cover-up?"

"She thought if she poked at it enough we'd find out. But, Matt, if, *if* she was right, that doesn't mean it's anything sinister. Maybe the police are just trying to keep the investigation quiet."

"Or, maybe not."

Blair shook his head firmly. "This isn't a movie plot, Matt!" He saw the hurt look in Matt's dark eyes and relented. "Okay...look. I'll talk to Jack. He's ex-CIA. Maybe he can tell me if she was onto something. But I can't promise anything more."

Tania Roca's dead eyes stared out of the photograph accusingly. Jim forced himself to look for a moment and then turned to the next. The next was a close-up of the bruises on her neck. After that came the wider shots of the room.

" – son! Earth to Ellison!"

Jim looked up.

Henry Brown stood there, a frown on his face. "Are you okay, Jim?"

Jim blinked. "Yeah, I'm fine. What can I do for you?"

Brown handed him a file. "The articles you wanted."

"Thanks." Jim slid the file into his in-tray without looking at it.

Brown leaned over his shoulder, glancing at the photographs spread out on Jim's desk.

Jim stiffened. "Could you give me some room, H?" he snapped.

"Sor-ree!" Brown held his hands up in surrender and backed off.

Jim watched him go. He slid the photographs back into their envelope. He leaned back in his chair, rolling his shoulders to get the stiffness out. How long had he been staring at those? Too damn long.

He reached for the file Brown gave him and opened it. It contained archived copies of Tania Roca's articles from the Tribune. Everything from her early work covering trivia like high school football and local bake-sales to the series of articles she published in '08, the ones that exposed Hal Fazzino and made Tania Roca's name as a journalist.

Jim read the articles, skimming through the early stuff but reading the later articles much more closely. Her writing matured noticeably over time and the articles from the past three years were slick work. The series of articles she wrote about Fazzino and the DA's office were impressive. One thing came through clearly: Tania Roca was no scandal-monger. Her articles presented facts, all backed up with evidence: no vague references to "a source". She asked questions, but very carefully didn't draw conclusions. The articles shone a light onto the whole corrupt structure she'd uncovered, but it was up to the reader to see what was there.

Jim didn't remember having read those articles before, though he must have. He did remember the impact she had. Her articles made people think. The right people...or the wrong ones, if you were Hal Fazzino. A judge issued the warrant for Fazzino's arrest before the last of her series was published.

This was the woman who had been investigating Cascade PD.

What had she found?

Chapter 3

28 August 2009

"I prescribe strong coffee," Jack suggested. "Or maybe twenty four hours sleep. You look terrible, Blair."

Blair smiled tiredly. "I'll take the coffee, thanks. I haven't been sleeping too well." He picked up the book lying on Jack's desk: *Evil Never Rests* by David Rossi. Tania had loaned Blair her copy, but hers was an airport paperback. Jack's copy was a first edition. It was a true crime book about serial killers, written by an FBI agent. He opened it to the first page and saw that it was signed.

Jack poured coffee and set the mug on the desk. He manoeuvred his wheelchair back to the desk. "I won't ask what's wrong because I think I know. I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

Blair reached across to pick up the mug. "Don't be sorry, Jack. Just tell me the truth. Was Tania killed because she was onto something?" The coffee smelled too good to resist.

Jack was silent for a moment. Finally, he shook his head. "We might never know, Blair. That's the truth."

"I've spent the past week going over everything I know. Reading books like this." He tapped the cover of *Evil Never Rests*. "I understand why you and Tania thought lack of motive was a common thread in the files you showed me. I think I understand how you got from that to serial killer. But I don't remember any other commonality in those files."

Jack looked surprised. "Have you ditched anthropology for behavioural science?"

"I've been trying to figure this thing out, yeah."

"And what do you think of Tania's theory?"

Blair gripped his coffee mug tightly. "I don't know, man. Everything I've read suggests Tania was wrong. But she's dead. That's a hell of a coincidence...and I can't get past it."

Jack nodded gravely. "I've been thinking the same thing about the coincidence. It is difficult to accept that it's not chance. But if it's not chance, that means not only that Tania's theory was right, but that somehow whoever killed her *knew* she was a threat to him. Blair, if that's the case, the list of suspects is very short, and we're both on it. Who else knew she was behind the blog?"

Blair spilled coffee on his pants. He hadn't thought of that. He set down the mug and tried to ignore the pain. "You're not on it, man. The cops didn't get a CCTV picture of the killer, so he didn't use the elevator. You couldn't have got to her apartment any other way."

"You'd make a good detective," Jack grinned. "Though while we're talking hypothetically, remember I wouldn't have had to do the deed personally. My point is however unlikely the coincidence seems, so few people knew about her work that the idea she was killed because of it is even more unlikely."

Blair sighed. He was so tired. "You're probably right." Put that way, it did sound like paranoia.

But then Jack said something that made him think again. "For what it's worth, I did think the coincidence was a bit much at first." He picked up the book. "This man, David Rossi, is an acquaintance. He's with the FBI, so I asked him to look into a couple of things."

"Like what?"

"The kind of murders Tania was interested in are supposed to be reported to the FBI."

Blair frowned. "Murder isn't a federal crime."

"Unless someone kills in more than one state, or crosses a state line to do it. That's true. But the FBI owns the ViCAP database. Don't you watch CSI?"

"I don't even have a TV, man," Blair protested.

Jack's eyebrows raised but he didn't press the issue. "Fair enough. ViCAP – the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program – is a database holding records of homicides, serious sexual assaults, missing persons and unidentified human remains. It's intended to speed up detection of serial crimes that cross state lines and cases like those Tania highlighted should be in the database whether they're solved or not."

"How does that help us? Is this online?"

Jack shook his head. "You can search online and find the public notices – the FBI most wanted, facial reconstructions of unidentified remains – but the main database, no. What I was about to say is that I still have some contacts at the FBI. I called David to find out if Tania's cases were in ViCAP. I figured that if they weren't, it would be evidence of a police cover-up."

"Oh. And are they?"

"Yep. All the cases Tania and I looked at were entered into the database. My contact said there's no apparent connection between them. I think if there was, the BAU would have picked up on it."

"You're telling me to back off," Blair said. The thought was worrying.

"I'm telling you to be careful. Let the authorities do the investigating."

This was exactly what Blair had told Matt Roca. He nodded, appreciating the irony. "I will. Thanks, Jack." He finished his coffee and stood up. At the door, he glanced back over his

shoulder. "If the cases aren't connected...why do you think Tania was killed? The one thing I'm sure of is that wasn't random, man. Someone planned it."

Jack looked very serious. "I don't know, Blair. There doesn't have to be a serial killer for one of those cases to be the reason. Some of those she was investigating were really bad people – organised crime and drug dealers. Maybe someone thought she was getting too close to their business."

By the time Blair reached his office he had decided Jack was right: knowing too much about these things made a man look for the worst-case scenario. He shouldn't let himself fall into that trap. He had papers to grade, and work on his thesis that he'd been neglecting. He found a tape of tribal music to relax him and settled down at his desk, music filling the office as he worked.

Some time later, he a knock on his door interrupted. Before Blair could answer the door opened and a familiar face peered around it. "Can I come in?" Matt asked.

Blair set his work aside with a smile. "Hi, Matt!"

"I – ah – I brought coffee and muffins." Matt held up a Starbucks bag. "Just in case I wasn't welcome."

"Of course you're welcome!" Blair bounced to his feet, leaping around the desk to greet Matt.

Matt sat on the edge of Blair's desk and opened the bag. "I didn't know what you like so I got straight coffee," he announced, handing Blair the plastic-topped cup. "Mine's a mocha. And..." he produced two muffins, one blueberry, one chocolate "...your choice."

"You certainly know the way to my heart!" Blair chose the blueberry.

"I think I should have brought espresso. You look shattered, Blair. When did you last sleep?"

"Last night...not for long, though." The coffee was perfect, and very welcome.

"I haven't been sleeping too well, either." Matt's smile faded. "Blair, I came because..."

"I know," Blair interrupted. "I should have called you days ago. I've been looking into it, man, but I'm still not sure. There has to be something Tania didn't tell us."

"Probably. Tan kept secrets for the sake of it. She didn't even tell me about her blog until I caught her." Matt looked hard at Blair. "Wait a moment. Blair, I asked you to help, not work yourself to death! Is this why you haven't been sleeping?"

Blair nodded, but said simply, "Tania mattered to me, too."

Matt set his mocha down on the desk. "That settles it. You're coming with me."

Blair laughed into his coffee. "Oh, really?"

"Blair, I know you dated my sister, okay? I'm not making a pass at you. But you need to relax and have some fun. Put the books away, and let's both take the night off."

Blair glanced at his stack of books, then at the coffee and muffin Matt had given to him. Matt might believe what he was saying, but Blair knew a mating ritual when he was the object of it. He smiled. "Can I finish my coffee first?"

Jim shoved the crime scene photographs back into his desk drawer. He slammed it shut. Was everyone looking over his shoulder today?

"You're doing everything you can, Jim." Taggart's voice was soft.

Jim shook his head. "She shouldn't be dead."

Taggart sighed, leaning back against Jim's desk. "I know what you mean. I still can't believe she's gone."

"Was she a friend of yours?"

"No. We knew each other, had dinner a couple of times, but it was strictly professional. The Fazzino case was mine, remember?"

Jim did remember. He'd been a little envious. Bringing down a district attorney who was taking money from organised crime was a career-making case.

"Tania's articles started it and she was a big help on the case. We made...a kind of deal so she wouldn't report too much while the investigation was in progress. A couple of weeks ago she called me – that was the first time we spoke since I wrapped up the case. She said she was calling in the favour I owed her, so we had a meeting."

Jim leaned back in his chair. "Yeah, I've been meaning to ask you about that," he said, trying to keep his tone casual.

"I thought you might."

"Can we talk somewhere...not here?"

"Sure."

Jim checked his watch. "Time I called it a day. Let's get a couple of beers."

Pedro's was only a block away from the Police HQ; a lot of cops spent lunch hours or evenings at the bar. Taggart bought them each a light beer and they sat in one of the booths at the rear; away from the smoke and the noise of the jukebox, where they could talk privately.

"I don't think our meeting is relevant to her murder, Jim," Taggart was saying as they sat down.

Jim agreed. "Probably not. But I still want to know. What did you talk about?"

"Unsolved murder cases. If it was anyone but Tania I would have thought she was looking to haul the PD over the coals, but that was never Tania's style. She had a list of murder victims going back for years that she thought were linked. She wanted my opinion and a quote for her blog but I couldn't tell her much because they were open cases."

"The night we watched the game, you mentioned Lamarche. What else was on her list?"

Taggart frowned into his beer. "I don't remember all of them. Lamarche, Jansen, Vallery...um...Kraemer was one she mentioned. She had about ten."

"I don't get it. Jansen was a pimp. Lamarche sold drugs. Kraemer was a schoolteacher. What's the connection?" But there was something they had in common. They all had police records. Jim stayed quiet, wondering if Taggart would pick up on it.

"Good question. She was cagey about it, but if I had to guess I'd say she thought it was the same perp."

"That's ridiculous!"

"I thought so, too."

Jim took a long drink of beer, thinking that one over. If the same person committed several murders you generally saw a similar modus operandi. That didn't apply to the cases Taggart listed. There was no obvious common factor in the victims, either. Finally, Jim looked back at Taggart. "Kraemer was your case, wasn't it? What did you come up with?"

"The murder was mine, yeah. I drew a big blank. There was a mile-long list of people with motive. Shit, anyone in Cascade who was a parent had motive. But there was no one we could tie in to the murder. You remember the case – the guy was scum."

"Who do you think killed Kraemer?" Jim pressed.

Taggart glanced around them, checking no one was near. He spoke quietly. "The way I figure it, it was probably a hit. I think the parents of one of the kids he abused hired someone local to take care of it. That's why we couldn't link the killer to the victim."

"Kraemer was acquitted of those charges," Jim noted.

Taggart laughed harshly. "We all know he was guilty. He got off because the only two kids brave enough to testify were taken out of the picture."

"We never proved that wasn't an accident," Jim answered. But he did remember the case and Taggart was right. It happened in '07. Brent Kraemer was a schoolteacher who systematically

abused the children he was responsible for. Child abuse didn't fall under Major Crimes, but when the two kids died just before Kraemer's trial, they treated the deaths as murder. They were teenagers: the girl was fourteen, the boy a year older. They died in a car accident and all the evidence suggested it was a joy ride. Certainly neither of them should have been driving. The parents of both kids insisted neither of them would have been joyriding, but there was no evidence of foul play. It forced Taggart to sign off on the case as an accident, and Kraemer's trial went ahead without the testimony of the two best witnesses. There were two other kids who did testify, but one of them was so scared on the stand that his evidence was useless, and the other unfortunately had a track record of imaginative lying. On the stand the prosecution had no difficulty demolishing his story. And the jury bought it. An abusive bastard who was probably involved in the murder of two kids was acquitted. Not the PD's finest hour.

Jim leaned forward across the table. "Joel, are you saying Kraemer deserved to die?"

"No one," Taggart mumbled into his beer bottle, "deserves to die like that." He met Jim's eyes, his expression hard. "But I do think he deserved twenty years hard time." He hesitated, then added, "You know, Jim, I did my job on that case. I really did. But between you and me, I'm glad I couldn't find the killer. If I'm right and one of those kids' parents was behind it, I would have hated to see them go down for murdering that SOB."

"No one will miss him, that's for sure," Jim agreed gruffly. He drained his beer and looked at the bottle. Maybe he could use something stronger. That case left a bad taste in his mouth. "Another?" he offered, and headed through the choking smoke to the bar. He hated cigarette smoke. Simon's cigars he could handle, but this was too much. He ordered another beer for Taggart and a scotch for himself.

Taggart took the bottle from him with a nod of thanks. His eyes went to the glass in Jim's hand but he didn't comment on it. "Jim, about Tania. Was that a professional job?"

Jim slid back into the plush leather seat. "I've considered it, but that doesn't add up. She made some enemies exposing Fazzino last year, but why hit her now? It's too late to affect the Fazzino case, too late to send any message." He sipped his scotch. It burned his throat going down – just what he needed. "She was a well-liked woman from a close family, with a bright future. I can't find anyone who even disliked her, let alone anyone with a motive for murder." He drained his scotch. "I'd better go. See you tomorrow, Joel." He started to get up.

Taggart stopped him. "Jim. If you need a hand with that case..."

Jim managed a smile. "Thanks. I've got it covered."

Jim slammed the truck door closed and leaned back in the driver's seat, closing his eyes. The smell of cigarette smoke clung to his clothing, somehow even stronger in the close confines of the truck than it had been in the bar. He stripped off his jacket and tossed it into the back,

hoping that would alleviate the smell, but it didn't help. He turned his key in the ignition and the air conditioning kicked in. That helped, a little.

He set off for home. The sooner he could wash this stink off himself the better.

Kraemer. Jansen. Lamarche. Vallery.

Dead bastards. Closed cases. Not names Jim wanted to hear again. He found himself gripping the steering wheel tightly as he drove, making his fingers cramp. The pain was a welcome distraction.

A dispatcher's voice came over the radio as Jim pulled up at a red light. "All available units. Code 6-417. 2913 Durnell Street."

Jim picked up his radio. "Ellison one-zebra-one. Show me responding. I'm about three minutes away." Code 6 was a request for backup; 417 meant an armed suspect. He turned the truck toward the right. The junction was too busy for Jim to turn on the siren and go; he had to wait for the green light. "Come on," he muttered to himself. "Come on!"

The light flashed to green. Jim hit the gas.

Dazzling light exploded into his vision. Throwing up a hand to block the painfully blinding light was a reflex, automatic. The moment he'd done it Jim knew it was the most stupid move he could have made. By then it was a millisecond too late.

The truck spun out of control beneath him. Jim squeezed his eyes shut against the dazzle and grabbed the wheel again, but he had no idea in that instant which way to turn. He heard a screech of tyres and a crash.

Jim had just enough time to recognise the taste of his own blood before he lost consciousness.

"Jim. Jim, can you hear me?" The voice sounded urgent.

Jim tried to answer, but nothing seemed to work. He couldn't make sound. Couldn't move his mouth. Tried to raise a hand and felt an explosion of pain, shooting up his arm and across his chest.

He forced his eyes open a crack. Everything was blurred, but he saw a pale-haired man leaning over him. He was wearing white. A doctor? Was he in a hospital? What happened?

"Jim, I'm Doctor Ericson. Just relax, you're going to be fine."

Good news.

Jim's head was pounding. Every breath hurt, like something deep inside was broken. He couldn't remember what happened. Was there a fight? An accident?

He struggled to stay aware, but it was a losing battle.

"...units near 29th and Western. Reported 216 in progress."

Jim, just turning into Western on his way to the gym, reached for the radio. "One-zebra-one, responding on Western. Any details for me?" 216 meant sexual assault; he hit the accelerator, but there was too much traffic for him to plough through.

"Roger one-zebra-one." Dispatch provided the details he requested as Jim headed for the location. Radio chatter let him know more backup was on the way, but he didn't wait. Someone needed help now. His gun was in his hand as he left the truck.

But he was too late.

Jim saw the woman's body on the ground, but concentrated on the scene first. The 216 was reported "in progress" so the perp could still be nearby. He searched the area with his eyes but saw no one.

Holstering the gun, Jim knelt in the garbage next to the victim. He called dispatch on his cell as he reached for her. "This is Ellison, I need an ambulance at 29th and Western..."

Then his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he recognised her. The cell phone fell from his hand, forgotten. "Carolyn. Oh, god..."

Choking on fear, the stink of garbage, blood and sex overwhelming him, Jim lifted Carolyn's body into his lap, cradling her as gently as he could. He thought he heard her moan as he moved her and his heart leapt – she was alive! She was bleeding from her neck. Jim stripped off his jacket to cover her and desperately tried to stop the bleeding.

"Stay with me, baby, please. Carolyn? It's Jim, I'm here. You'll be okay, just...oh, god, baby, please hold on."

Jim never knew how long he waited, kneeling in the alley holding the woman he loved, choking on the smells surrounding them, feeling her life leak away, hot blood on his hands.

It was a hundred years before the ambulance arrived. By then, she was gone.



“...And a serious concussion.” Stephen Ellison looked worried, but added. “The doctor tells me it could have been a lot worse.”

Simon was sceptical. It could have been worse? It was bad enough. He was surprised to find Jim's brother already at the hospital when he arrived; apparently the hospital had called them both.

“Do you know how long it will be until I can speak to him?” Simon asked carefully.

“You can try now, Captain. He might hear you. He's been drifting in and out.”

That didn't sound good at all.

“I'll leave you to talk alone,” Stephen offered.

“Thanks.” Simon opened the door quietly.

Jim was in a private room, his body hooked up to half-a-dozen machines. He seemed to be sleeping. Bruises stood out starkly against his pale face. A butterfly strip covered a cut on his forehead. The rest of his injuries were concealed beneath the hospital gown he wore.

Simon sat down beside the bed. He said quietly, “Jim?”

Jim turned his head toward Simon, but his eyes remained closed. He muttered something Simon couldn't hear.

Simon leaned closer. “Jim, can you hear me?”

Jim's eyes flew open suddenly, but it was clear he didn't see Simon. He murmured something again.

Simon frowned. It sounded like “Carolyn” but she had been dead for years. “Jim, it's Simon,” he tried again, but without much hope. Stephen had warned him.

“It should have been me,” Jim muttered.

Simon sighed. Carolyn's murder weighed heavily on Jim, but Simon thought he had put it behind him. Why was Jim dwelling on it now?

He stayed at Jim's side a little longer, but it was clear Jim didn't know he was there. He left, intending to return in the morning.

Simon thought back to the night Carolyn died. Jim should never have taken that call, but of course none of them, the dispatcher least of all, realised the victim was Jim's fiancée. They said he'd gone a little crazy at the scene, but by the time the ambulance reached the hospital Jim was calm...almost frighteningly so. Simon remembered that moment vividly – he had broken every speed limit to reach the ER just ahead of them and was waiting when the ambulance

arrived, bearing Carolyn and Jim. Simon hadn't known, just then, that she was dead. He thought she'd been attacked and hurt, but no worse. Jim followed her body out of the ambulance. His hands and clothing were scarlet with her blood.

Jim met Simon's eyes and said, "When we find the man who did this to her, Simon, you'd better not let me near him. This would be worth going down for life." He was very calm as he spoke, very serious. And Simon knew he meant it.

It was almost 4am when they "escaped" Club Doom. Blair was laughing as they emerged into the rain. His euphoria was partly alcohol, partly narcotics (hard to avoid when the air was full of smoke, even if he didn't smoke it himself) and partly the relief of the first real fun he'd had since the night Tania died. He hadn't enjoyed a night out so much in ages.

He and Matt walked out to the main road in the hope of finding a cab. Long before they reached the road, Blair was soaked, his fleece jacket poor protection against the rain. His long hair clung to his skull and face in rats' tails. He didn't really care.

Matt wasn't much better off, though his leather jacket seemed to keep off the rain.

They reached the road but there was no sign of a taxi. Matt leaned against a streetlight. He ran both hands through his wet hair, slicking it back from his face. "One question," he grinned.

"Shoot," Blair agreed.

"What the hell were you doing dating Tan? Didn't she notice you're into guys?"

Blair felt his mouth drop open. He couldn't think of anything to say.

"Aw, come on! You weren't exactly subtle. Staring at those two leatherboys."

Suck it up, Blair, he's got you dead to rights. Blair shrugged. "I like girls, too," he admitted. "I like...most things." Even knowing Matt was gay, Blair hadn't planned to come out this early in their friendship. Some gay men had...issues...with bisexual guys.

Matt had no such problem. "Including leather?" he teased.

Blair laughed. "Leather, silk, rubber...makes a change from books."

Matt grinned back, wringing out his hair again. "Blair...I know I sort of promised I wouldn't do this, but...would you like to stay the night at my place?"

Blair didn't hesitate. "Sure, man. I'd love to."

Chapter 4

29 August 2009

Simon rested his elbows on his desk, one hand on his forehead. He was getting a headache already, and it was barely eight o'clock. He looked up at the tap on his door. "Come!" he called. "Joel, good, come in. Coffee?"

"Thanks. How's Jim? Have you heard?"

Simon poured coffee for both of them. "He's going to be fine," he answered, "but it's going to be a week or two before he's back. I need you and Rafe to take over Jim's caseload while he's on the sick list. Can you handle it?"

Taggart winced. "I guess we'll have to."

Simon sighed. "I know everyone's under pressure right now. I'm not expecting miracles, Joel. I just want to know nothing will slip under the radar completely."

"Got it. I'll talk to Rafe and make sure we've got it covered." Taggart frowned. "Simon...about the accident. Do you know what happened?"

"The other car ran a red light. Witnesses agreed the other car was at fault, but it sounds like Jim lost control of his car very quickly. The doctor said he'd been drinking but he wasn't over the limit." And that in itself made no sense. Simon had seen Jim drive; it wasn't like him to lose control so easily. If he'd been drunk it would have made sense...but Jim wouldn't drink and drive, either. The whole thing made no sense.

Taggart shook his head firmly. "We had a beer together after work, Simon, but Jim barely touched his. There's no way he was – "

Simon's phone rang, interrupting. Simon answered it and listened for a moment. "I'd better take this, Joel. We'll catch up later."

Taggart took the hint.

"Put him through," Simon instructed. He gave it a second for the line to clear then said, "Hello, who am I speaking to?"

"I'm trying to reach Detective Ellison," a man's voice crackled down the phone. It was a poor line. "And I'm tired of the runaround."

"Detective Ellison is unavailable," Simon explained patiently. Any of the cops in the bullpen could have taken this call, but what he'd said to Taggart was true: everyone had a heavy case load right now. Every little helped, and Simon could take one call for Ellison. "I'm Captain Banks, Major Crimes. Who am I speaking to?"

The silence went on for longer than he expected. "My name is Blair Sandburg. When can I reach Detective Ellison?"

"Not for some time I'm afraid. Perhaps I can help you?" Sandburg...Sandburg... He was a witness in one of Jim's cases...

Sandburg seemed hesitant. "Um...I don't know. I guess..."

Simon gave him time.

"Uh...I have some information that might be relevant to Tania Roca's murder."

Tania Roca. Simon nodded, memory clicking into place. Sandburg was the man who found her body. "You know something you didn't tell Ellison when you made your statement?" he asked.

"I didn't know everything then." Sandburg sounded defensive. "Look, I really want to talk to Ellison."

"As I said, he won't be available for some time. Come in to the department and I'll have someone take your statement."

"Why not Detective Ellison? Isn't this his case?"

"It is, but he's not going to be in work for a few days."

"Shit, man, do you have any idea what it took for me to make this call? I'm scared, man."

Belatedly, Simon understood what was behind the man's hesitation. Sandburg hadn't said he wouldn't come in to the department, but his insistence on speaking only to Ellison implied he didn't want to do this formally. Did he have some reason to be afraid? "Alright," Simon said. "I'll meet you myself, Sandburg. You pick the place."

Another long silence. "Okay," Sandburg said. He sounded reluctant.

Simon waited for him to suggest a place, but the line stayed silent. "Where should we meet?" Simon prompted gently.

"Oh. Um. There's a Mexican place on 34th. Could you meet me there at two?"

"I'll be there," Simon promised.

"Great. Thanks." The line went dead.

Simon hung up the phone. There went his lunch plans. Jim had picked a really bad time to get hurt...

Even so, at 2pm sharp Simon walked into the little Mexican café. It was a good choice of rendezvous: a public place, plenty of people around, but quiet enough to allow conversation.

Simon had glanced over the CCTV pictures in the Roca file and found an image of Sandburg so he would recognise the man. He saw him sitting at the bar and walked over there. "Are you Sandburg?" he asked.

The scruffy young man looked up and nodded. "I'm Blair. Captain Banks?" The kid looked harried. He was hugging a thick file in his lap. There was a bowl of nachos in front of him but it looked untouched. He was drinking water.

"I'm Simon Banks," he confirmed. "Let's sit at a table, shall we?"

Sandburg nodded, picking up his bowl. "Did you want something?" he asked.

Simon couldn't help a smile. "No, thanks. I'd rather get down to business."

Sandburg seemed relieved by that. His expression became serious, quickly. "Sure, man." He headed to a free table and Simon followed.

Sandburg started talking before Simon sat down. "I only met Tania a couple of weeks before she was killed, but I was one of the few people she told about the blog she was working on. See..." he took a sip of his water, "I couldn't shake the feeling that her death had to be connected with the blog. But I only just figured it out."

He sounded like a kid playing amateur detective, but Simon knew better than to let his feelings show. "Okay," he answered, non-committally. "Tell me what you think you've figured out."

"The *Eye on Cascade* is an anonymous blog: Tania set it up that way because she was a serious journalist, and editors treat bloggers as amateurs. I knew she was *Eye*, and Jack knew. Jack Kelso. But Tania swore both of us to secrecy. I didn't tell anyone and I'm sure Jack didn't. Captain, as far as I know, there's only one other person who knew both that Tania was the *Eye on Cascade* and what she suspected. A Detective Taggart."

Simon frowned. "Taggart's one of mine, but if you're implying..."

"No, no. Well, not...hell, I don't know what to think." He still held that file in his lap. He was holding it tightly, his eyes darting from side to side.

The kid was really scared, Simon realised. "Why don't you tell me what's on your mind," he prompted.

Sandburg met his eyes, taking a deep breath. "I have to trust you. I just wish I was sure... Okay, here it is." He lifted the file he had been clutching onto the table and started to talk.

He talked for nearly an hour, showing Simon the statistics and information Tania had collected prior to her murder and drafts of the reports she'd planned to post. The *Eye on Cascade* blog was provocative, each entry critical of some element of authority in Cascade, but the provocative posts were "clickbait" – each led to a more detailed and balanced analysis of the

issue under discussion. These were serious journalism: properly investigated, sourced and fact-checked.

Finally, Simon closed the file for him. "Sandburg, I hate to put a dampener on your detective work, but the kind of thing you're talking about...you'd see obvious common factors. Similarities in the M.O. or in the victims..."

It didn't dampen him one bit. "Exactly!" Sandburg declared. "Look, I'm not claiming to be an expert or anything. I did a lot of reading about this and all the books say the same thing. But I knew there was something I was missing, because Tania wasn't stupid. Then yesterday I remembered something Jack said about CSI..."

Simon rolled his eyes. "This is going to be good..."

"No! Please listen! Jack was surprised I'd never heard of it. He said it like everyone in the world watches that show. That's when I realised what Tania was thinking. What if you've got a killer who is smart enough to know what police will look for? What if he kills in a different way each time, knowing that the cops will think each murder is a different killer. Isn't that possible?"

Honestly, Simon didn't think so. He shook his head slightly.

"Look, I know you think I'm a dumb kid with an over-active imagination. But this..." Sandburg thumped the file between them, "This is real. Tania knew more about these cases than she wrote down. I think she was right. I think the same person is responsible for at least some these murders. Someone who is sophisticated enough to know what the police will look for when they investigate so he covers his tracks. He changes his M.O. each time, so you'll never catch on."

Simon wanted to dismiss it. The common factor in these cases is that there is no common factor. Yeah, that made perfect sense. But Tania Roca was dead and if Simon remembered the case file correctly, Jim had uncovered no convincing motive for her murder. That fact alone gave him an obligation to consider any possible lead. It sounded far-fetched, but...

"I'll look into it, Sandburg."

Sandburg nodded, but he still seemed nervous. "Look, man, I want you to keep my name out of it. I mean that."

Simon understood. He didn't think the kid had anything to be worried about, but if he was connecting this information to Tania Roca's murder, and by extension to Taggart, his fear made sense. Not that it was remotely possible Taggart could be involved in something like this. "I'll do what I can, Sandburg, but if it turns out you're right and Tania Roca was murdered because of this theory, the D.A. is going to need your testimony. I can arrange protection for you if there's reason to believe it's necessary, okay?"

"Okay," Sandburg answered uncertainly.

Simon gave him a card. "This is my direct line at the PD, and my cellphone number. Call me if you think of anything more, or if you need anything from us. Is there a number where I can reach you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Here..." Sandburg scrawled a number down quickly.

Simon was very troubled on his way back to the office. If Sandburg's theory was right, that did implicate Taggart. Or, by extension, anyone who knew about Taggart's meeting with Roca: everyone who was there at Jim's loft that night. And possibly everyone they might have spoken to afterwards. You couldn't contain the grapevine for long.

Could there be a rat in Simon's department? No...surely not.

But the seed of doubt remained.

Back at the office, he stopped by his secretary's desk. "Rhonda, I need copies of some of our old case files."

"No problem. Which ones?"

"I've got a list here. I need these as quickly as possible." He handed over Tania's list of unsolved murders. "And one other thing...get me a number for the FBI field office."

31 August 2009

FBI Behavioural Analysis Unit, Quantico VA

Jennifer "JJ" Jareau closed the file and added it to the non-urgent tray. She looked at the slowly-diminishing pile in her in-tray and sighed. It was an essential part of the job, reviewing the cases sent to the BAU from police departments all over the USA, but it could take a long time. The majority of cases only needed a profile or an advisory call from an agent. Those were non-urgent. But the reason she stayed late so often was for the cases that needed a more immediate response: the ones where the team were needed on-site.

She reached for the next file. Her phone trilled before she could open it.

She lifted the receiver. "Agent Jareau."

"Hello, Agent Jareau. I'm Captain Simon Banks of Cascade Police. Major Crimes division. Our local field office gave me your name."

JJ returned the unopened file to her in-tray and reached for a pen. "How can I help you, Captain?"

"I have a, uh, difficult situation and I need some expert help."

"Homicide?" she asked.

"Several."

JJ opened the ViCAP database and typed *Cascade* into the search on her PC. No red flags came up, and the number of suspicious homicides seemed about normal for a major city. "We haven't heard anything about a serial in Cascade," she answered cautiously.

"No, you wouldn't have. You see, I have a string of unsolved homicides. As far as I can tell, they are unconnected."

JJ narrowed her search: *Cascade, homicide, unsolved*. She said nothing, waiting for the captain to get to his point.

"A reporter recently came to one of my detectives suggesting these cases were linked. He dismissed her idea, and so would I...except a few days after that she was murdered in her home."

"And you don't think that's a coincidence," JJ suggested. The computer flashed up a name and a summary of the case: Tania Roca, COD blunt force trauma to the head, no credible suspects.

"The truth is I still think it's a stretch. As far as I've been able to find out the only other people who knew about her theory were two academics she'd consulted. One's a paraplegic and both have solid alibis."

JJ understood the unsaid part. "You're suggesting that someone in your department is implicated?"

"*If* her serial killer theory is the reason she was killed, and *if* it's a credible theory, then yes. That's a huge if, Agent Jareau, and I don't feel qualified to make that call. I need an expert to look over these old cases and tell me if there's anything at all to her theory. And I need it kept quiet."

"I understand," JJ said, and she did. The Captain couldn't risk letting his team know he suspected any of them, even if he didn't really believe this reporter's theory. On the flipside, if the BAU could reassure him the theory was baseless, he could relax and eliminate that angle of the murder investigation. But if the theory was credible, Captain Banks was going to need a lot more help.

"I'll need the case numbers, including the recent murder. One of our analysts will pull the case files from ViCAP and I'll have one of our best profilers examine them. If there's a connection, they'll find it."

"Thank you." She heard profound relief in his voice.

“One question, Captain. If we do determine there’s a credible link between these cases, do you want BAU assistance on the ground?” She knew he would need them, but many departments disliked the idea of letting the FBI in.

When Captain Banks remained silent, JJ spoke gently, “Police often fear inviting the FBI in, but the BAU has no interest in taking over or in grabbing the credit. Our team would be there in an advisory capacity only, unless it turned into a Federal case. We have a very high success rate and,” she added more softly, “if your officers are implicated, even obliquely, it might help to have us on the scene as neutral parties. But it’s your decision.”

“I don’t care about the credit, Agent Jareau. Let’s see what your team thinks, first. If I need you, I’ll let you know.”

“That’s fine, Captain. Just email me those case numbers.” JJ gave him her email address. “I’ll call you within the week, but please call me if anything happens to make it more urgent.”

A few seconds after she hung up the phone, an email arrived from Captain Banks. JJ checked the contents quickly then forwarded it to Garcia before dialling the tech analyst’s extension. She wasn’t sure Penelope would still be there, but she answered brightly:

“Fountain of all knowledge, how may I amaze you this fine evening?”

JJ couldn’t help smiling. “I just forwarded an email to you.”

“Got it! Mm. Cascade. Ferries, rain and mob bosses.”

“Also the best coffee in North America,” JJ agreed. “I need a dossier compiled from the case files in the email. Start with just the case summaries but give me as much as you can print in a half hour. I’ll try to catch Morgan before he leaves.”

“I will have it for you at the speed of light.” Garcia was typing away even as she spoke; JJ could hear the rapid tapping of the keys.

Two hours later Derek Morgan tapped on the door of Garcia’s domain, hoping she hadn’t gone home. He turned the handle and found the door unlocked, so he walked right in without waiting. “Hey, baby-girl. Are you up for some magic?”

Penelope turned from her bank of computers with a huge grin. “What exactly do you have in mind, tall-dark-and-sexy?” she purred. She peered up at him over her bright red glasses and fluttered her eyelashes.

Morgan chuckled and pulled a wheeled chair from under one of the desks. “Cascade, Washington.”

Penelope's grin vanished. "JJ's case." She returned to her keyboard, all business once again. "I have a search running already. How can I make your day?"

"Oh, you made my day every day just by sayin' hello," Derek shot back, but he sat beside her, laying the file on the desk. "I need a wider search."

"Hit me." Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, waiting.

"Homicides, solved or unsolved. Go back ten years."

She typed fast, but answered almost faster than the computer. "Too many."

"I know but we need to start with a wide net. I want to build two pools and see where they overlap."

Her eyebrows raised. "Creative thinking. I like it. Parameters?"

"Pool one. Homicide victims with some link to Cascade Police. Arrestees, criminal attorneys, CIs, cops and their families...any clear connection."

Garcia sucked air through her teeth as she typed. "That's gonna take a while. What's your second group?"

"This should be easier. Murder, not homicide where there was no witness to the actual killing and either very little forensic evidence or forensics rendered useless by errors in the investigation."

"Okay, that will be a smaller..." Penelope stopped typing as a window opened on her screen and text scrolled through it. "Thirty six in the second pool. If it's overlap you're looking for it will be faster to run the thirty six for police connections." She was doing it as she spoke. "Whoa. Thirty."

"Good work, baby-girl. Run that list against the files JJ already highlighted and get me the case files I don't already have." Morgan tapped the folder in front of him.

"Your wish is my command, oh master." She tossed back her blonde hair and smiled, but her smile faded quickly. "Is this a bad one?"

Morgan frowned. "Not the way you mean. I want to read those files before I head home so I can work up a profile in the morning."

"The files are downloading now. Do you want me to stay?"

Morgan thought about it. The work would go faster with two, but as much fun as Garcia could be, she would be a distraction to him tonight. He shook his head reluctantly. "No, baby-girl. You go on home."

She sighed theatrically. "To my sad and lonely bed without you, my dark knight."

Morgan patted her shoulder. "I'll be here, thinking of you." He rose and pushed the chair back under the desk.

"Oh, be still my heart!" Garcia was still typing as Morgan slipped out of the room.

Having completed the work Morgan asked her to do, Penelope knew she should close everything down and leave for the night. She had to be back at work by 8:30 no matter how late she stayed. Penelope Garcia was something of a perfectionist, however, and the job felt unfinished. She had only searched the police files. Maybe one more search...

The spider programme was one she had created herself. It would crawl through publicly available information, much like Google did on a regular basis, but her algorithm was optimised to return results relevant to her BAU work. She entered the list of names and parameters and set the spider running. It would search, index information about them in case she needed to retrieve it quickly, but it would also alert her to any connections between the names; anywhere at all where more than one of the names appeared.

The first hit was a blog called *Eye on Cascade*. The hit showed up because two of the murder victims were listed in one article: Manuel Lamarche as the article's subject and Ryan Frazer in the *coming next week* section. Penelope skimmed the article and decided to print a copy for Morgan. Just to be thorough she looked for the article's author. It was anonymous, of course, but that didn't matter. The blog was built on Wordpress, the most popular blogging software in the world and therefore the most often hacked. Penelope could get into the administrator functions without even needing a password.

There was only one user listed, and the associated email address was a generic gmail. She shifted the blog to a side-screen and hacked into the email account. It contained only comments on the blog, nothing to indicate the identity of the user.

"You're sneaky," Penelope said aloud. Most bloggers didn't care too much about covering their tracks. Often those who did had no idea how to do it effectively. Plan B: check out who pays for the blog. She looked up the WHOIS data. Unsurprisingly, the domain ownership was not in the public database, but that led her to the web hosting company and from there it wasn't hard to track down what she needed. The domain and web site were owned and paid for by Tania Roca. She was another of the victims.

"Oh, boy." Penelope called Morgan on the internal line.

"I'm a bit busy, baby-girl," he said.

"I know, but I need you. Could you come here for a moment?"

Penelope's tone must have given away how much she was freaking out because he answered instantly. "I'm on my way, mama."

In the forty-five seconds before Morgan opened her door, Penelope had found her way into the Wordpress "trash" folder. Her freakout level tripled.

"Penelope?" Morgan said as he entered.

"That list of names JJ gave to us? They are *a//* here in this blog. Tania Roca was writing about the murders. And get this – most of it is unpublished."

Morgan's eyes widened for a moment, then he looked grim. "That's a connection."

"Morgan, when did she die?" Penelope asked.

He had to go and fetch the file to answer the question. "21 August," he reported as he returned.

"No, exactly when. What time?"

Morgan frowned. "The ME's estimate is between four and five pm."

"Look here." Penelope waited for Morgan to join her. She showed him the trash file. "All these were future articles, all written up and programmed to publish on a weekly schedule. On 21 August, the log says Tania Roca deleted them. After 5pm."

"When she was already dead?" Morgan sighed. "I've got to go through the rest of those files. You'd better go home, baby girl. It's late and I think we'll be flying to Cascade in the morning."

Hotchner's office door stood open and Morgan could see Rossi inside. The two men seemed deep in conversation and Morgan hesitated to interrupt them. Hotch had been leaning on Rossi a lot since his wife's murder. He was back at the BAU, reinstated as unit chief, and doing well. Their first two cases since his return had been closed successfully, but Hotch still needed some support.

Hotch saw him hovering and beckoned him in. "We're just tying up a report. What's up?"

Morgan raised the file he held; it was now much thicker than when JJ handed it to him. "I think we need to go to Cascade."

Rossi's head jerked up. "Cascade? This isn't the Tania Roca murder, is it?"

You knew about this? Morgan kept his expression neutral, but it was an effort. "That's one of them. What do you know, Rossi?"

Rossi looked unperturbed. "Have you heard of Jack Kelso?"

Morgan nodded. "He was a CIA whistleblower. I read his book about the 9/11 investigation."

"We have the same publisher. I wouldn't say we're friends, but we've met at several functions over the years. He's a professor at Rainier University now, and he was consulting with Tania Roca before her murder. He called me a week ago and asked me to look into some old cases."

Morgan passed him the first half of the file – the cases JJ had given him the night before. "These?"

Rossi flipped through the pages. "Yes."

"What did you make of them?"

Rossi handed the file back to Morgan. "I didn't review the details. Jack wanted to know if they were in the ViCAP database – they are – and whether anyone other than Tania had connected them. No one has. I gave him that information but he didn't ask me to go deeper and that was the day we got called in on Jenny Shrader's kidnap. How did it end up on your desk?"

"Cascade PD sent those files last night and requested a profiler's opinion. JJ gave them to me. I would have just added them to the pile, but there's one detail that made it more urgent."

"Which is?" Hotch prompted.

"According to Captain Banks, if these cases are a serial killer, and if that's the motive for the reporter's murder, most of the potential suspects are cops."

Hotchner stiffened. He knew – they all knew – what that meant. "Have we been invited?"

"The call came from Cascade's Major Crimes division. They asked for a profile, not our team."

"In your opinion this is a serial, or you wouldn't be bringing it to me."

Morgan nodded. "Based on the case files, in my opinion those eight cases have a consistent signature and another five cases Garcia dug up are close enough to be the same unsub." He offered the full file to Hotchner, who took it but set it down without opening it. "There's also evidence that it was the motive for the reporter's murder."

"Have JJ call him and get us invited. And work up a preliminary profile. If police are implicated we will need to deliver the profile as soon as we hit the ground."

3 September 2009 (Three days later)

Cascade PD

This did not look good.

Jim's first day back at work after his accident, he was keen to get back to the job, even if he would be tied to a desk for a while. He was recovering well. The arm still hurt: he wore a support bandage under his shirt but refused to wear the sling – he'd stuffed that into his desk drawer, just in case. He couldn't, however, hope to use a gun until the arm was better. Five minutes at the range told him that. So he was busted to desk duty.

Desk duty might have been worth it if he could have avoided this meeting. But Simon called in every detective in Major Crimes, and looking around the table, Jim guessed no one had any more clue than he did as to what was going on. This wasn't the standard weekly briefing, that was for sure.

For starters, Sheila Irwin sat on Simon's right. If IA was here, there was trouble, and Jim was not a fan of Detective Irwin. On Simon's left were several strangers. From their clothing and bearing, Jim guessed they were Feds, but which flavour? FBI? ATF? Marshalls? No, not Marshalls – they didn't work in groups this big.

Jim took a seat opposite Simon. He did not look happy. "What's this all about, Simon?" Jim asked casually.

"You'll find out when everyone's arrived," Simon answered shortly.

That was unusually curt for Simon. Jim shrugged it off. "Okay."

"It's good to have you back, Jim," Simon added with a quick smile. He looked up as Brown walked into the room. "Good, we're all here."

Simon waited for Brown to sit down. He looked around the table, making eye contact with every person there. "A bit more than a week ago, I got a call from an informant. Based on his information, I decided to go outside our department for assistance. You all know Detective Sheila Irwin of Internal Affairs, and this," he nodded to the tall, dark-haired man on his left, "is SSA Hotchner of the FBI's Behavioural Analysis Unit, and his team. Agent Hotchner?"

Hotchner looked around the room, his expression grim. He looked like cracking a smile would break his face. He glanced to his left. "These are agents Rossi, Morgan, Prentiss, Doctor Reid and Agent Jareau. We're here because we believe you have a serial killer at work in Cascade."

Agent Jareau, a gorgeous blonde, had a stack of files on the table in front of her. She began to pass them out to the detectives.

Taggart said dryly, "I think we'd have noticed."

Jim accepted a copy of her papers, but didn't look at it. "You're a little late, Agent Hotchner. We got Lash two years ago."

"This isn't a joke, Jim," Simon said firmly.

Hotchner went on, ignoring the comments. "The papers you're holding list eleven unsolved murders committed in Cascade. The earliest occurred in 2001. The most recent is a current case: Tania Roca. We believe the same perpetrator committed all eleven."

Jim glanced down the list. "Did you come with a list of suspects, too?" he asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm. But the sarcasm covered the sudden racing of his heart. Hotchner's list included Ryan Frazer, Brent Kraemer, Verne Jansen, Mannie Lamarche, and Frank Vallery...all very familiar cases.

"Detective...?" Agent Morgan turned to him, his eyes cool.

"Ellison," Ellison answered.

"Detective Ellison," Morgan repeated. "I was a cop before I joined the FBI. I know how it feels when the Feds muscle in on a case. That's not what's happening here. We're here to advise and help, but Cascade PD will be running things."

Jim kept his eyes on the paperwork. "I investigated the Lamarche murder, and Tania Roca. There's no similarity in the MO. The victims are different. The state of the crime scenes was different. How in the world do you figure it's the same perp?"

Morgan exchanged a glance with Hotchner, a silent conversation that Jim didn't like at all. "You have a high success rate on your cases, Ellison. Why did you dead-end on these two?"

"It's too early to call the Roca case a dead end. There was no one who seemed to have a motive for her murder. She has enemies, but no one who would benefit. But the case is open and the investigation isn't finished. The Lamarche case was the opposite. Mannie Lamarche was a crack cocaine dealer who tried to muscle in on the Deuces' territory. The list of people who wanted him dead is as long as your arm, but we had no murder weapon, and very little forensic evidence at the crime scene..."

"That was also a feature of the Roca crime scene, wasn't it?" Morgan interrupted.

Jim frowned. "Well, yes, but the scenes were so different..."

"That's one of the elements that has brought us here," Agent Hotchner said. "While on the surface there is little to link the eleven cases we've highlighted, we found some striking similarities when we dug a little deeper. Usually we would spend some time with you and the investigation before getting to the profile, but in this case we want to give you the profile right away. You will need to re-examine all of these old cases and it's possible the profile will cause you to reconsider other cases, too."

"We're listening," Jim said, without much enthusiasm.

Agent Rossi, the oldest of the agents at the table, began. "The first commonality in these cases is the cleanliness of the crime scenes. It's not that unusual for a killer or serial sex offender to

take forensic countermeasures. Anyone who watches TV understands the importance of the DNA they might leave behind them. But these crime scenes stand out. The cleaning is meticulous and shows a better understanding of CSU procedures than most people can glean from television. In the past, we would have profiled this as law enforcement, but so much of this is on the internet today..." he shrugged. "What we can say is this unsub is someone with a strong fascination with crime and police procedures. It's also possible he has served time in prison. That's one of the ways killers learn to be this careful."

"We profiled the unsub as something we call a 'cleaner'. This doesn't refer to the crime scenes but to the victimology. All had a connection to crime in Cascade, and in most cases, they were suspected or convicted criminals. This leads us to believe that the unsub chooses his victims because they are, in his perception, bad people. He sees himself as cleaning the streets."

The young man, Doctor Reid, picked up the thread. "This type of serial killer begins with what he sees as a noble mission but eventually they will always devolve. Peter Sutcliffe killed fourteen women between 1969 and 1981 in England. After his arrest he told police that God ordered him to kill prostitutes. His first victims were sex workers, but his later victims were students and women in regular jobs, and were not killed in red light districts. He began with a mission, but he became so addicted to the killing itself that in his mind any woman who crossed his path was a prostitute and therefore a target."

"Which is why," Agent Prentiss added smoothly, "this type of unsub will not stop killing until he is stopped. Tania Roca doesn't fit his victim profile. It is possible she was killed by someone else, but we are proceeding on the assumption that she was killed because her investigation threatened to expose the unsub."

"There are other common threads," Agent Hotchner interrupted. "This unsub invades his victim's territory to kill. More than half of these victims were killed in their own homes; the others in a workplace or other location where they would have felt safe. Yet the unsub is careful to avoid detection. There are no reliable witnesses who saw him arrive or leave the crime scenes. He's not spontaneous or impulsive. Each murder is planned in detail, possibly for weeks before the unsub strikes. It's likely he stalks them but he also studies the locations where he is going to kill as carefully as the people he targets. Jansen was killed in his swimming pool, during the only half-hour of the weekend when he was alone on the estate. Tania Roca's killer entered her apartment building using the only entrance not covered by a working camera."

Taggart frowned. "Could we be looking for a pro?"

"No," Jim answered, his eyes moving down the list of murder victims as he spoke. He remembered all of them, and Hotchner wasn't wrong about the common threads. "A couple of them might have been professional hits," Jim added, "but not all of them. At least, I don't think so. I eliminated that possibility in the Roca case."

Jim wasn't the only one at the table who was sceptical. Brown was shaking his head. "But there's no consistency in the kills. Jansen was drowned. Kraemer burned to death. Roca was bludgeoned and strangled. These can't be the same perp."

"I understand your..." Rossi began.

Jim interrupted him. "No, H, they're right." He looked at Brown. "Sorry to butt in again. But look at this list, H. Three of them were my cases. Two are Taggart's. I can see one of yours...if any of us had investigated all or most of these cases we would have picked up on the similarities, but none of us has worked on more than three, have we? Like you said, the connections aren't obvious. They're not the sort of things we look for."

"So, accepting your theory for now, what are we going to do?" Jim looked at Simon.

Simon said, "Every case on this list is going to be re-examined. Where possible, someone other than the original investigating officer will look into each case. Hopefully a fresh pair of eyes will make a difference. We'll be looking for suspects or witnesses who fit the BAU profile, but also for any new leads or connections between the cases."

Morgan spoke as if he was reading from a page. "You are looking for a white male aged between 32 and 38. He is single or at least living alone, but this isn't a man who has difficulty forming relationships. He may even have been married in his past. He is most likely from single parent family and the parent who raised him was a dominant personality, possibly abusive, but the abuse would have been psychological or extreme physical discipline rather than sexual abuse.

"We expect to develop a physical profile of this man by re-examining the murder cases. What we know already is that he is very strong, but he's not powerful in a way that makes him stand out in a crowd. This is a man who is good at blending in, at being unobtrusive.

"The victimology tells us a lot about the killer. You'll be familiar with killers who target victims based on their looks; Nathan Tubbs targeted young brunette women, for example. These are surrogates for someone else – the unsub's real obsession. In cases like this one with a more varied victimology we can still use this to profile the unsub's sexuality. This unsub's victims are mostly male and there appears to be no sexual aspect to these murders. However, although he does not sexually abuse his female victims, he does pose them in positions that suggest a sexual element to the murder. He doesn't do that to the male victims. Based on this victimology, we think he's a heterosexual, but he's in some way overcompensating.

"This man is highly organised. In his day-to-day life he probably appears perfectly normal to those who know him. He has a job and does it well, his colleagues like him and his family and friends probably think he's a nice guy. He almost certainly lives alone; the amount of planning and preparation he puts into his murders would be noticed by a partner or roommate, and he does put a lot of effort into that planning. Nothing about these murders is random, and nothing

about them is sloppy. He is highly intelligent and is familiar with police methods. Organised killers are often fascinated by police work and will find ways to inject themselves into the investigation, sometimes even coming forward as witnesses. This unsub shows even more familiarity with police methods than we're used to seeing. Anyone who reads crime novels and biographies or who watches real-life crime shows on television can sweep a crime scene for trace evidence, but *this* unsub knows a great deal about this police department. He doesn't only know how you work, he knows the people you deal with. One of the things we need to determine is whether this knowledge comes from an obsessive reading of local news, whether you have been hacked, or whether we have to look for someone employed in this building."

Agent Prentiss picked up the thread. "The element of this case that's most worrying is the huge variation in murder method. The unsub is familiar with a range of weapons and trained to use them. He also kills with his bare hands. This suggests he has a background in the armed forces. We believe he has served in the Marine Corps or the army and may have been involved in black ops. He has certainly done at least one tour of duty in a war zone. This would have provided a natural outlet for his aggression and it's only since being discharged that he has turned to murder. He was probably discharged involuntarily, no more than four years before his first murder."

Agent Hotchner spoke up. "Finally, in cases like these we look for a stressor, something that tipped the unsub over the edge and drove him to make that first kill. We are not certain if the earliest case we've identified is his first victim, but it seems likely he began killing in the fall of 2001, so look for a suspect who suffered some kind of trauma or loss around that time."

Hotchner closed his copy of the case file and looked around the table. "Any questions?"

There was silence around the table for a moment. Finally, it was Jim who spoke up. "Fall of 2001. There's one trauma that affected all of us."

Rossi nodded. "The 9/11 attacks could have contributed, particularly if, as we suspect, this unsub has a military background. But the stressor we're looking for is personal. It won't be 9/11 unless he was there in New York, or perhaps lost someone on one of the planes."

Brown set his pen down with an audible thump. He had been making notes throughout the presentation. "There's a lot of detail in that profile. You can't possibly be sure of all that."

"You'd be surprised how accurate some profiles are. The profile is based on the case evidence, and what we've learned from decades of studying psychopaths. But, yes, there's a margin for error. A profile is just a guide. A good guide, but not more than that."

There were a few more questions, and then Simon handed out assignments to everyone.

As the meeting broke up, Brown joked, "Sounds like we've got our prime suspect right here."

Jim grabbed Brown's arm, hard. "That's *not* funny, H."

Brown shrugged it off, not apologising. "Geez, man, where's your sense of humour?"

"What was that about?" Morgan was frowning a little as he turned to Simon.

Simon shook his head, hoping to laugh it off. "Oh, nothing. Just banter."

Sheila Irwin was still with them, taking her time putting her papers in order. She glanced up as Simon spoke. "Are you sure?" she prompted, dashing Simon's hopes that she'd take the hint and stay quiet.

"Yes," he answered firmly, "I'm sure."

Agent Morgan lifted his briefcase and started to put her report away. "Captain...Detective Irwin...banter or not, I'm guessing from your reactions that the profile appears to fit one of your officers. Am I right?"

Reluctantly, Simon nodded. "Ellison. I don't know about the childhood thing, but he's ex-army and at least some of his work back then was classified. He was discharged on medical grounds in 1998. He's single and lives alone."

"Divorced?"

"No. Never been married." Simon looked at Irwin determinedly. "But let's not repeat past mistakes here, understood? I *know* Jim Ellison."

Irwin shrugged. "Ellison is also one of the six officers implicated in the Roca case. I won't jump to conclusions, but I need to check all of them out. Including you, sir."

"Sheila, you can check me out all you like. As long as we're clear Ellison isn't a suspect in this case. Not until you can give me something more substantial than a profile."

"Fine by me, Captain. I'll be speaking to all six of you today. Hopefully we can eliminate all of you from suspicion. Believe me; I don't want to think one of our detectives is a serial killer, any more than you do."

"In the meantime," Hotchner suggested smoothly, "my team will work with Major Crimes, but we should keep our approach to this investigation co-ordinated. It will be too easy to get in each others' way."

"You're here as a guest, Agent Hotchner," Simon reminded him. His voice sounded too terse, even to his own ears. He took a breath and tried again. The case was getting to him already; not surprising with IA breathing down his neck on one side and the FBI on the other. "I just meant..." he tried to apologise.

Hotchner met his eyes. "You don't need to remind me, Captain. We are here to support you and your team, but make no mistake, Captain Banks, while I'm on this case, everything I live and breathe goes into finding this unsub. If we have the same goal, we don't have a problem here."

Despite himself, Simon found he was smiling. "I don't think we have a problem."

Chapter 5

3 September 2009

"...But even though those beliefs seem strange, don't just dismiss them," Blair insisted. He was walking down the stairs toward his office with Britta, one of his students, at his side, continuing the debate they'd started in the afternoon's seminar.

Britta threw up her hands. "Oh, come on. You can't believe things like spirits are real!"

"Reality," Blair lectured, "is what you perceive. Do you think proteins and electrolytes are real?"

Britta grinned, letting him know she saw the trap, but she walked into it anyway. "Yes..."

"But you've never *seen* an electrolyte, have you?"

"Obviously not. But – "

"You believe it because it's a logical part of your world view. It's the way you've been *taught* the world works. It's the same for them, Britta. Right or wrong, theirs is a complex and logical world view. If you dismiss it as ignorance or superstition, you'll never understand it."

They reached Blair's office and he opened the door, waving Britta in ahead of him. But the office wasn't empty. Matt was waiting, sitting behind Blair's desk as if he belonged there. Blair said to Britta, "Just wait a moment and I'll find that book for you." He smiled for Matt. "What, no muffins?"

"I had something more sinful in mind." Matt's seductive smile left no doubt what he meant, and Blair cursed his fair complexion as he felt a blush rise to his cheeks. In front of Britta! Damn...

"Can't wait," Blair muttered, turning to the bookshelves to hide his face from both of them. He took longer than he really needed to find the book he'd promised her. He got himself under control and turned back. He blew across the top of the book, pretending it was dusty, and then handed it to Britta. "Here you go. Remember, you don't have to believe what they believe, just understand that it's as real to them as molecules and atoms are to you. Otherwise, it won't make sense."

Britta tucked the book under her arm. "I'll try. Thanks." She turned to go.

"Oh, and Britta?"

She looked back.

"Smart work today. Well done."

She grinned. "Thanks." She vanished out of the door.

Matt was still seated behind Blair's desk. Blair wondered for a moment what Tania would think about him leaping into her brother's bed. He studied Matt. They were definitely brother and sister. The same dark eyes and touchable hair. The same smile. The resemblance was probably part of the attraction for Blair, but he didn't think the reasons were important any more. The first night after they'd been out to Club Doom was simple, uncomplicated (and very good) sex. Seeing each other again was...more. Funny that he didn't feel so out-of-his-league with Matt as he had with Tania. More was very welcome.

Matt looked up and smiled. "This is really good stuff, Blair."

"What is?" Blair moved closer to see what Matt was reading and recognised the draft chapters of his thesis that he'd been proofreading earlier. "You were reading my paper?"

"I didn't think you'd mind."

Blair leaned over Matt's shoulder. "I don't...not really. I'm just surprised." His thesis wasn't secret, but only his doctoral committee had seen it so far. He hadn't planned to share yet. "How long have you been here?" he asked.

"About an hour. You said I could wait here."

"How much have you read?"

"I started just skim-reading, and then I got fascinated. You write really well, Blair. Did you really spend six months in the jungle?"

"Longer than that on some trips. The Peru trip was six months, but only two of them were in the jungle. It was..." Blair closed his eyes, remembering, "a life-changing experience. What I've written in that chapter barely scratches the surface."

"That's amazing." Matt turned in the swivel-chair, looking up at him. "I mean, I know about tribal art and stuff, but you *really* know it." He started to stand. "I want to hear all about it, Blair."

Blair smiled wickedly. "But you didn't bring coffee!"

Matt laughed. "I've been feeling miserable all day. How do you manage to make me laugh?"

"Missing Tania?" Blair asked gently.

"Always." Matt's smile was gone.

"Let's go somewhere fun, then. But not the Doom. It'll have to be someplace quiet if you want my jungle stories."

"It sounds dangerous." Matt refilled his wine glass and offered the bottle to Blair.

Blair hadn't wanted to eat at a fancy restaurant, so they ended up with Chinese take-out, two bottles of red wine and a desert Matt insisted on getting from one of his father's restaurants: layers of pastry, whipped cream and fruit. It didn't go with Chinese take-out but it looked delicious. They spread a dust sheet as a picnic blanket on the floor of Blair's office. It was playful and fun.

Blair nodded. "It's...risky. You weigh the potential benefits against the risk and make a choice. The Peru trip was too risky for me to get academic funding. I went as a volunteer with SAHR – they're a human rights NGO. I speak Quechua, at least enough to get by, and I understand tribal societies...at least a little more than the average volunteer. Enough to make me useful. So I gave SAHR four months of work, and in return I got to visit some of the people who still live in pre-civilised tribes. It was the most amazing experience of my life."

"Tell me," Matt urged eagerly.

Peru, 2006 (Three Years Earlier)

Blair sat cross-legged on a woven mat, trying to watch the Shaman without being too obvious about it. The shaman defied all the Western clichés: he was a relatively young man (Blair guessed he was around 35) so his hair was black, not white. He wore no exotic paint, just a small tattoo on his cheekbone. His eyes had great depth, though, and Blair had a strong impression those eyes saw *everything*.

The shaman spoke, breaking a long silence. Blair concentrated on every word but the tribal dialect was quite different from the textbook Quechua he knew and he was able to understand only the general gist. He thought he was being called an idiot.

"He says," Blair's guide translated, "that you have an American man's...romantic?...vision. He believes you do not understand what you seek."

Blair answered carefully, "Understanding is the thing I seek."

"Why?" the Shaman asked him.

Blair understood the question that time, and didn't wait for a translation. "I am...a seeker of knowledge for my people. I want to help others understand and respect these ways, but first I must learn for myself. I cannot teach what I do not understand."

After another protracted silence, the Shaman said, "The knowledge you seek will not bring you peace. This quest demands your life."

It sounded like a threat, but Blair understood enough to realise it wasn't meant that way. He nodded agreement, offering his hands to the Shaman. "My quest to understand the sentinels is my life's work."

When his guide repeated Blair's words, the Shaman leaned forward, grasping Blair's wrists. Blair instinctively pulled back but the Shaman's grip was strong. He made himself relax and looked up into the Shaman's eyes. His heart beat against his chest. There was no reason to be afraid, but he was.

Finally, the Shaman released Blair. Blair didn't dare speak first.

The Shaman spoke a few words, his tone kind, then he rose and walked away.

Blair's guide looked at him. "He said you speak more truth than you know. He said if you have the courage to follow this path, return at sunset."

Blair's heart leapt. He would return.

The drink was bitter; a milky liquid with small grains floating in it that could have been seeds or dirt. Blair glanced at the Shaman. He wanted to ask what was in it, but he knew that would be a serious breach of the tradition. It was a test of courage: he was supposed to drink, or reject, without knowing. Blair lifted the cup back up to his lips and took a second tentative sip. It didn't seem too dangerous. He drank it down.

His head started spinning almost at once. Blair dropped the cup, raising a hand to his head. He looked at the Shaman, asking for help with his eyes as the world turned inside-out around him.

The Shaman answered, telling him to relax and, if Blair understood him correctly, to 'open his heart'.

That was a mental image he didn't need. As soon as Blair thought it, it became uncomfortably literal – a hand touched him above his heart, splitting his skin apart.

"Not that open," he heard, but not with his ears. The words were English, or perhaps language made no difference in this place. "Come with me," the Shaman instructed.

Blair stood and found that he was nude. He looked down to ask the Shaman if that was supposed to happen and found him gone. In his place, a great eagle regarded him with unblinking, golden eyes.

The eagle spoke: "Will you run in that form?"

Blair started to explain he didn't have another form, but even as he formed the words he felt something shift inside him and his body transformed. It was the strangest feeling: his limbs contracting and changing, his hands and feet becoming paws, fur flowing from his skin. It

wasn't a horror-movie-transformation; there was no pain as there would surely be if his body morphed like this in reality.

"This *is* reality," the eagle chided.

Blair started to form an apology but the eagle spread its wings and launched into the air. Instinctively, Blair followed. He ran through the jungle, leaping over fallen trees, ducking under vines, weaving between obstacles. Faster and faster he ran, following the eagle. He had no conception of time in this place, no idea how long he ran or how far. Finally, the eagle cried out, landing on an outstretched branch. Blair bounded to its side, sitting back on his haunches. He wasn't even tired.

They were at the top of a gentle slope, looking down into a jungle clearing with a sparkling green pool at its centre. Many animals were gathered at the poolside, so many that at first the scene made no sense to Blair. There were rabbits, peering through long grasses, mice peeping out from beneath wide leaves, and a rodent-like creature Blair didn't recognise. A white crane stood at the edge of the water. They were all gentle animals, all vegetarian. All but one. A jaguar slowly circled the gathered animals. Blair watched the great cat, entranced by the deadly grace of its movements. He thought it was corralling the animals and wondered why none of them tried to flee. Then he realised the jaguar was protecting them. He saw a snake coiled in a tree above the clearing. Slowly, the snake descended toward the gathered animals. It was hunting.

The jaguar leapt, its jaws spread wide. It snatched the serpent from the air, biting it mid-body. The snake struck, fighting to get free, but it seemed to have no effect on the jaguar. As the jaguar's leap ended, it dropped the snake, its claws and teeth rending into its flesh. Blair watched the battle in fascination, the eagle beside him utterly forgotten. When it was over, the jaguar's mouth and paws were scarlet with blood. It was a primal vision. Predator and prey. Blair felt his heart beating faster.

The jaguar looked up. Its lambent eyes met Blair's and it snarled. Blair was an outsider, not welcome. The jaguar leapt toward him, its bloody jaws wide. Blair was frozen in place.

An instant before the jaguar's jaws closed around his throat, Blair found himself back in his own body. He was lying on the dirt floor of the Shaman's shelter. His heart was pounding as if he'd run a marathon.

The Shaman's face appeared above him and gentle hands helped Blair to sit up. The Shaman offered Blair a piece of fruit. "Eat. It will bring your spirit back to your body."

Blair obeyed automatically. The fruit was citric and slightly bitter; it did help banish the last light-headedness of his vision. He met the Shaman's eyes, but the man simply returned his look, saying nothing.

Eventually, Blair felt able to speak. "Did you..." He struggled with the Quechua words, though he knew what he was trying to ask. "Do you know what I saw?"

"Do *you* know what you saw?"

Blair nodded. "I think so. The Jaguar Spirit – that's your sentinel?"

He saw the barest hint of a smile touch the Shaman's lips. "It is. Do you understand?"

Understand? So quickly? Blair thought it would take him months, if not years to understand everything he had seen. He replayed the vision in his mind. The predator guarding the gentler animals. The jaguar's bloody jaws. He understood. "A sentinel is the protector of the tribe, and also a predator. He is a warrior spirit to be respected and feared."

The Shaman's eyes met his again, deep pools of wisdom. "What place has such a spirit in your world?" he asked Blair.

3 September 2009

"It wasn't until I got back to Cascade that I started to understand what he was telling me," Blair concluded. "A sentinel has no place, no purpose, in a modern, urban environment."

"So you gave up searching?"

"Never!" Blair was holding Matt, pressed against his body from behind, stroking his arm and chest gently as they lay on their improvised picnic blanket. It was more comfortable than he had been with a lover for a long time. Matt's easy intimacy was relaxing, but Blair wondered if it might become stifling over time. That very wondering was a reflection of their very different backgrounds: Blair as an only child knew how to be friendly and connect with people but rarely did his friendships become close. His sexual relationships were short because after a week or two or three it always got to a place he wasn't able to go. Matt, on the other hand, was from a large, apparently happy family: he could be cagey on the surface, like showing up all smiles when inside he was crying over his sister's death. But once you got past the surface, once you were trusted, Matt was an open book. Honest, curious and genuinely interested in Blair's stories.

Matt turned in Blair's arms. "Still searching, then?"

Blair smiled. "Mm. I've been searching all my life. Since I started my research here I've found hundreds of documented cases of people with one or two hyperactive senses. Like perfume testers or wine tasters, people who can detect variations in taste or smell that most people can barely believe. But it's never more than two senses, and usually it's smell or taste – those are biologically related senses and they're the ones least useful in the urban world. I have a theory

about why that happens, but it's going to take years to get the evidence. I need to get my doctorate first. Publish some papers in the right places. Maybe then I can get enough funding to find my holy grail."

"Which is a real sentinel."

"Yep. Someday."

Matt returned Blair's smile. "You sound like Tania."

It was the last thing Blair expected. He sat up, moving away from Matt. "Do I?"

"She was always passionate about her work. Like you."

"Aren't you passionate about what you do?"

Matt shook his head firmly. "I just work for Dad. I want to deal in art, not just buy decorations for restaurant walls. It'll be a few more years before I've saved enough to fly the nest."

"It sounds like you have plans."

"Oh, yeah... Starting with let's go back to my place. Unless you want to do it on your office floor."

"Sounds like an offer I can't refuse," Blair answered. It was also a very firm close to the conversation. He wasn't about to complain.

Blair found two kinds of lettuce, fennel, cherry tomatoes and Parma ham in Matt's refrigerator, and freshly baked bread rolls on the worktop. It was perfect. Matt said good sex always made him hungry and Blair was inclined to agree. He searched around for knives, a chopping board and plates and started work. He heard the shower start running and smiled to himself.

He tore the lettuce and washed it quickly. He was about to start on the fennel when he heard a knock at the door. That was weird; it was a bit late for callers and most people called from downstairs first. Only Matt's family knew the door code...and Matt was still in the shower. He went to the door warily, knowing this wasn't the best way to introduce himself. He checked the peephole in the door and saw a man and a woman standing there. She had straight, black hair. Could she be Matt's family? Blair didn't see any other resemblance. He opened the door.

Immediately, the woman produced an ID. "I'm Agent Prentiss, FBI. This is my colleague Doctor Reid. Are you Mateo Roca?"

She was obviously expecting him to say yes. Blair looked at her credentials, painfully aware he wouldn't know a fake FBI ID if it hit him in the face. He'd been feeling paranoid lately.

He shook his head. "Uh, no...I'm Blair Sandburg. Matt's...just taking a shower." Oh, god, that was embarrassing. She had to reach the obvious conclusion from that.

"Oh." There was an odd look in Prentiss's eyes. "May we come in and wait?"

"I guess that will be okay," Blair stepped back to let them enter. He noticed that she looked around as she passed him, her eyes taking in every detail. Not that the hallway was that interesting. Blair ushered them into the kitchen. "I was just fixing a snack...you want something?"

Doctor Reid smiled. "Thanks, but no." He was a young man, not much older than Blair himself. "I *would* like to speak with you, too, Mr Sandburg. About Tania Roca's death."

"I guessed this must be about Tania." Blair went back to the salad and picked up a knife. "I've already told the police everything."

"I've read the police files. There are just a couple of questions they didn't think to ask. We won't take up much of your time."

"Okay. What can I tell you?"

Prentiss glanced through the kitchen door. "I, uh, I didn't realise you were close to the family."

It wasn't quite a question, but Blair answered anyway. "I wasn't." He tossed the lettuce and fennel together into a bowl, and reached for some olive oil to dress it. "I met Tania two weeks before her murder, and met Matt at her funeral. I know this must look...I don't know how it looks..."

"We don't need to pry into your private life, Mr Sandburg."

"Blair, please."

"Blair," Prentiss smiled again, with a little nod. "The night she died, how many people knew you – " she broke off as Matt appeared in the doorway.

Matt was wearing a bathrobe, loosely tied at the waist, and nothing else. He'd expected Blair to be alone. "What's going on?" he asked.

Agent Prentiss offered him her ID. "I'm Agent Prentiss, FBI. I've been assigned to look into your sister's murder."

Matt frowned. "Isn't it a bit late for an interview?"

Prentiss nodded. "If this is a bad time, we can come back. But this won't take long. We're just getting a feel for the case."

Matt looked at Blair then back to Prentiss and Reid. “/f it's a bad time? That's obvious, isn't it? But you're here now. How can I help?” He crossed over to Blair's side. “Will the food keep?”

“Sure,” Blair agreed.

“Doctor Reid and I are profilers,” Prentiss told them, when she had their attention. “It's our job to break down the elements of a crime, figure out what's in the killer's mind. I want to look around, get a feel for what happened here. I realise it's difficult for you, but I promise I won't intrude more than I need to.”

“It's okay. If you're looking for whoever killed Tania, I want to help. Just give me three minutes to get dressed.” Matt left the kitchen quickly. Blair, who was learning to read Matt's moods, guessed he was fleeing the scene for some space, not because he was embarrassed by his lack of clothing.

Blair covered the salad with a plate and turned back to the agents. Why was the FBI involved, suddenly? Had Captain Banks called them in? “You were about to ask me something?” he prompted Doctor Reid.

He nodded. “How many people knew you and Tania had a date that night?”

Blair shrugged. “I don't know. Lots of people. I didn't try to keep it a secret.”

“You were excited about going out with her?” Prentiss suggested.

Blair smiled, remembering. “Totally. She was amazing...”

Prentiss's look was compassionate. “While we're waiting for Mateo, could you walk me through what happened when you found her?”

“I...” (*...so don't want to do that...*) “I guess so,” Blair agreed reluctantly. He headed into the hallway. “I told the police all this. Didn't you read my statement?”

“Yes, but it's not the same as being here. You don't need to describe everything, Blair. Just show me what you did, and where you went.”

He nodded. “The door was unlocked when I got here but it wasn't open. It opened when I knocked. I...”

“Just what you did,” she prompted gently.

“Yeah. I walked through here to the living room, calling out for Tania.” Prentiss followed close behind him as Blair explained. He tried to be subtle about watching her, but she probably noticed. He wondered what she was seeing. What could walking around add to what she must already know? “...and I called 911.” Blair concluded. “I stayed in the hallway until the cops arrived.”

"When did you enter the living room?" Reid asked.

"I was just inside the door when I saw her. I could tell from the doorway that she was dead. I started to back away and I fell. When I picked myself up I went for the phone. The 911 operator told me to try CPR. I knew it was useless, but I went over to her then. They record those calls, don't they? You can hear that part."

"Yes, the call would have been recorded. Did you attempt resuscitation?"

"No. I just touched her and told the woman she was cold. If I thought it would do any good I would have, but..." Blair shrugged unhappily.

Prentiss looked around the living room. "Is this room the same? I mean, the way the furniture is arranged."

Blair glanced around. He didn't want to remember that night but the image of Tania's body still burned in his mind. Total recall. "Everything is the same, except the card table. It's a fold-away, usually kept under the window."

"Thanks." Prentiss walked around the room slowly. She looked out of the window into the darkness. She turned around slowly, looking at the door where Blair still stood, then to the couch.

Matt reappeared from the bedroom, dressed in jeans and a sweater. "Sorry to keep you, agents. Please, have a seat." His gesture directed her to the couch.

Prentiss sat down; Reid remained standing at Blair's side.

"Mr Roca, the Cascade Police invited our team to consult with them on this case, so I've already seen the police files. You don't need to tell me anything you've already told them. There are just a few details missing; questions they probably didn't think to ask."

"Go ahead."

"The first thing is your sister's clothing. When she was found Tania was wearing old jeans, a worn blue sweater, no bra. Does that sound like the sort of thing she'd wear at home?"

"It's her Sunday-afternoon-wear. I know Tan was getting ready for a date that afternoon. She probably just tossed on any old thing after taking a shower. She'd do that while she did her hair and make-up. Tan was very conscious of her appearance if she knew she'd have company, even family."

Prentiss looked thoughtful. "When you say 'even family', does that include you?"

"She was a bit more relaxed with me, but sometimes, yes."

"Okay. I know you were out of town on that day. Is that a regular thing for you? Are you often not here?"

"Depends what you mean by regular. I have a work-related trip about every two months. I'm usually gone for about a week. Sometimes longer, if it's a place worth some sightseeing."

"And that's your normal routine?"

Matt frowned a little. "Yes. If you need to verify where I was..."

"No, it's not that," Prentiss answered quickly. "Whoever killed your sister was confident she would be alone here. So he knew you were away, which sounds like common knowledge to those in your circle, and he knew she would be here that afternoon, not working. That's what I wanted to confirm." She leaned toward Matt a little. "I know this is difficult, but can we talk a bit about your sister? I'd like to get a sense of the kind of person she was."

Doctor Reid caught Blair's eye and gestured toward the hallway. Blair understood and allowed Reid to lead him back into the kitchen.

"According to the police nothing was missing from the apartment." Reid told Blair "Do you know if Matt has missed anything since he made his statement?"

Involuntarily, Blair glanced back to where Matt still talked with Prentiss. "There was one thing," he said reluctantly, "but it was probably gone before her murder."

"What was it?"

"Tania kept a notebook to record her investigative work. Matt showed it to me and I noticed there were pages missing. Matt thinks she tore them out herself. Nothing in her room was touched. The cops dusted for prints and everything." He shrugged. "A couple of scraps of paper isn't much of a trophy, and if it was about hiding what she discovered surely he would have taken the whole notebook."

Reid gave a quick smile. "Are you a criminologist, Sandburg?"

"No, anthropologist. But I know serial killers often take trophies from their victims."

"I don't think I said anything about a serial killer."

Blair tried not to roll his eyes. "You didn't have to. Agent Prentiss said you're profilers. Since this isn't a terrorist attack or a kidnapping, that means you think it might be a serial killer, or you wouldn't be here."

"Actually, the BAU consults on a number of..." Reid began, then apparently changed his mind. "Yes, there's some evidence that suggests Tania isn't this unsub's only victim."

"Doctor Reid. That's PhD, not doctor of medicine?"

"I have PhDs in Mathematics, Chemistry and Engineering," Reid agreed.

Three doctorates? Reid must be a lot older than he looked. But it allowed Blair to talk to Reid as a fellow academic.

"I'm about to submit my dissertation for a PhD in anthropology. A killer taking trophies from a kill...that's behaviour you can trace back to hunter-gatherer societies. Even modern hunters take trophies from animals they kill. Heads and skins in America; the heart or liver in modern tribal cultures. In some African tribes they drink the blood – it usually has spiritual significance to them."

Reid nodded. "Yes, and warriors used to take the heads of their defeated enemies, to display or even cannibalise. You think it's the same thing as a serial killer keeping a memento from his victims?"

"The psychological urge comes from the same root," Blair said. "A kind of primal instinct to prove superiority. Just like the guy who keeps a skin or deer head on his wall."

"You're suggesting this applies to the unsub we're looking for now?"

The word *unsub* would have thrown him if Blair hadn't read David Rossi's book. It was a contraction of *unknown subject*: an unidentified perpetrator. Blair shook his head quickly. "No, man, I don't know nearly enough about what happened to Tania or the other victims. It's just an unconscious association, I guess."

"Primitive hunting behaviours. That's interesting." Reid produced a business card and handed it to Blair. "It sounds like they're done. If you think of anything else, or if you need to reach me for any reason, call my cell. Or you can get me through the Cascade FBI Field Office."

Blair took the card and slipped it into his shirt pocket. "Thanks."

Prentiss appeared in the doorway and Reid walked toward her.

Blair stayed where he was. He thought it would be a relief if the FBI got involved in this. It wasn't a relief. He was so scared he could barely breathe.

The building opposite Matt Roca's apartment was a block of offices. The fourth and fifth floors of the building were empty; office suites available to lease but not yet taken. In an empty office suite, a man stood near the window.

From his vantage point he had a clear view into the apartment building across the street.

Matt Roca, like his sister, never covered his windows. The watcher could see everything. He saw the FBI agent walk around the main room. Though he knew she couldn't see him, he drew back from his window as she scanned the street briefly. She didn't stay long.

He saw the two men come together after the FBI agents left. He watched them kiss. He felt an answering heat in his own body. They disappeared for a time after that. Not into the bedroom, which he could also see, but elsewhere. There was nothing for him to see, but he remained where he was, watching. Waiting.

His patience was rewarded when the two men returned. It was a sweet scene. He watched them come together in the dimly-lit room. He watched them remove each other's clothing, observed every kiss and caress. Pale flesh against dark; it was easy to see every detail. He heard himself sigh as one man knelt before the other, and wished for a better angle of view.

He rubbed his own hard cock through his pants as he watched.

Eventually, they were done, and he watched them spoon together on the bed as they prepared for sleep.

Shortly after, the watcher left the vacant office, satisfied.

4 September 2009, 9:00am

A special investigation room had been set up to keep the serial killer investigation separate from the other cases being handled by Major Crimes. Jim reached the room early, thinking he would be alone there. He wasn't.

Pictures covered three walls of the room: photographs from crime scenes, mostly, arranged in chronological clusters. Photocopies of forensic reports were pinned alongside each cluster. Death was everywhere.

Agent Rossi had his back to the door. He was studying the pictures of Brent Kraemer's body. Or what was left of it. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Jim spoke from the doorway, wary of disturbing him. "Any new insights?"

Rossi jumped as if Jim had woken him from a deep sleep. He turned to face him, saying nothing at first.

Jim stepped into the room. "Sorry."

He waved it away. "It's okay. I was lost in thought."

Jim moved past him to look at the wall. Kraemer's body was barely recognisable. Oddly, it wasn't the close-up shots that were the horrifying ones, as none of them told the full story. The mind tended to shy away from recognising what each picture showed. But the large, central photograph showed the whole, brutal scene. The body was contorted and so badly burned it

didn't even look human. There were traces of rope still visible at his wrists, but too much charring to see it all clearly. Jim frowned at the picture.

"Brent Kraemer," he said aloud. "His body was found by the fire crew the morning after the fire."

"Mm-hm," Rossi acknowledged. "The file says he died of smoke inhalation, but you can tell from the pictures he was alive and conscious when he started to burn."

"Yeah. Unpleasant."

"Absolutely. This unsub tortured just two of his eleven victims. Kraemer is the second. So I'm wondering: why those two?"

"Maybe it's not the same killer," Jim suggested.

Rossi looked at him. "You and your colleagues don't want to believe this is a serial killer, do you?"

Jim looked around the room, finding bad memories all around him. Boards had been set up around the perimeter of the room, each dedicated to one victim. There were photographs, locations, lists of evidence and, on some of them, written questions.

Jim's eyes returned to the Kraemer board and he suppressed a shudder. "I read your report about six times yesterday, trying to find something wrong with your logic. I can see the similarities in the M.O. Your analysis and profile make interesting reading. I do agree with most of your conclusions, but when I look around this room, seeing it all laid out like this, it seems a big stretch. I mean, how do you connect this..." Jim gestured to the photographs of the Kraemer scene, "...with something as clean as the Roca case? You've got to have more than 'no forensic evidence'."

"Point of entry," Agent Morgan answered from the doorway behind Jim. "Witnesses reported an unknown man present in Kraemer's building the afternoon before the fire. Detective Taggart concluded in his case file that this man was lying in wait for Kraemer. We can't be certain of that, but we do know that this unsub prefers to take his victims in their homes, or at least in the victim's territory. Kraemer was killed at home. So was Roca."

Rossi moved around to the display of the Roca murder. "Tania Roca. She lived in a secure building. She was very careful about security; her brother's statement says she wouldn't even let family into the apartment without checking the peephole first. I wonder if she'd been attacked in the past?"

"She never reported anything," Jim said.

Morgan's look was suddenly scathing. "Only thirty-two percent of rapes are reported, detective, and a woman attacked in her own home, by someone she knows, is less likely to report than someone attacked by a stranger."

Oops. Jim looked away. "You're right. Her behaviour does indicate a fear of assault. But it might have been just that – fear, not a past assault. Her articles pissed a lot of people off."

Rossi went on thoughtfully, "She was a sensible woman and careful, even paranoid about home security. Yet she apparently opened the door and invited the unsub in. Why? Who would she have let in?"

Jim looked at the familiar pictures as he answered. It was a question he had considered often enough. It was why Jim's case file concluded it couldn't have been a stranger killing. Either she let him in or he had a key. "Someone she knew. Family. A neighbour. Maybe a boyfriend." But Jim's investigation eliminated her close family as suspects, and there was nothing to suggest a neighbour or ex-boyfriend had a motive for murder. Of course, a serial killer didn't need a motive, as such...

"A colleague," Morgan mused. "A delivery man? No. Who would she *trust*?" He reached out, touching one of the pictures. "She's alone in her apartment, painting her nails. Someone comes to her door. We know whoever it was didn't use the buzzer downstairs. Was she suspicious? She went to the door, checked her peephole. She saw someone she trusted, or she saw something that made her decide to let him in. If he was a stranger..." Morgan turned to Rossi suddenly and flashed his FBI credentials the way he would to a witness he was about to interview. "Police creds are trusted by most people. Anyone not a criminal will let you in if you flash a badge."

Jim stiffened. "You're out of line, Agent Morgan."

"Any fancy dress store will sell you a fake police shield. Or you could steal a real one. A uniform is harder to fake without being caught, but it's not impossible and detectives like yourself don't wear a uniform. If the unsub presented himself as police or FBI, she would have let into her home. Don't you agree?"

Jim frowned. "Could be," he agreed. Their profile *had* suggested someone fascinated by police work. Some people did collect memorabilia and suchlike. He glanced again at the photographs then turned his back on them: he already had them memorised. He took a deep breath and looked at Morgan. "Look, about your profile. I know you heard Brown's crack yesterday..."

"About you? Yes, we all did."

"Well, I wouldn't want you to think..."

Morgan looked very serious. "I don't think anything right now, detective." He smiled briefly. "The profile will narrow down the suspect pool. Let's assume for a moment the unsub is works for Cascade PD. How many people work in this building? Not just cops – your support staff, janitors, the people who serve your coffee...everyone. About a thousand?"

"Probably more." Jim didn't see the relevance.

"That's our suspect pool. We can't possibly interview all of them, so we use the profile to narrow it down. First, eliminate the women. You're probably left with about six hundred are men. Our unsub is fit and strong, so we can eliminate anyone who is physically impaired, overweight, unusually small or with any kind of chronic illness. That probably cuts out about a third of the pool, but we're still left with four hundred potential suspects. I guarantee that if you do a cursory background check on all of them, at least ten will fit the profile as closely as you do. Two point five percent."

Jim leaned back against the table, crossing his arms. "So you're saying the profile is useless."

Morgan shook his head. "No, it's a compass. It tells us where to look and what to look for. And we can do a lot more than a cursory check once we've got a manageable number of suspects. But no one has ever suggested a psychological profile is a substitute for good, old-fashioned police work. It might give us our unsub but we still need to prove the case."

"That's good to know," Jim began, and looked up as Simon knocked on the door.

"Ellison, I need you in my office," Simon told him.

"I'm on my way."

Simon left.

Morgan interrupted, "I *would* like to talk over the Roca investigation with you, Detective Ellison. Can we talk later?"

Jim shrugged. "I know that look," he nodded toward the still-open door. "I think I'm going to be busy." He walked out.

As the door closed behind Ellison, Rossi turned to Morgan.

"What do you think?"

"He fits the profile," Morgan answered.

"And he didn't point out that we have six specific suspects, not ten pulled from a wide pool."

Morgan pulled out his phone and hit a speed dial. "Hey, baby-girl. I need everything you can dig up on Detective James Ellison, Cascade PD."

Chapter 6

1:45pm

"I've picked up a lot about profiling, but that's not what I do."

Simon reached across the table to refill Agent Jareau's glass with the sparkling water they were sharing instead of wine. "You seem very much one of them," he said with a smile. "What is it you do, if not profiling?" Agent "JJ" Jareau had suggested lunch; Simon wasn't sure whether the intent was to get him out of the way or if she wanted something. He knew her interest wasn't romantic: she talked regularly to a man she was clearly involved with.

JJ smiled over her glass. "The job title is Communications Liaison. I'm the first point of contact for people like yourself who need BAU assistance. I filter the cases."

"Filter? You mean you pick and choose?"

"Yes and no. I don't brush anyone off or shift requests to the bottom of the pile. It's more about figuring out the best way we can help. Most requests from police can be resolved by correspondence, a straightforward profile that will help point the investigators in the right direction or bolster their case. Some are really urgent. Cases where there's a missing person or an unsub has a short kill cycle – that's where having the whole team fly out can save lives. Part of what I do is make sure those cases get the immediate attention they need."

"That doesn't apply here," Simon pointed out. If that was the criteria for the team's presence on the ground, why were they in Cascade?

"This case is a bit different. When you first contacted me you implied suspicion might fall on one of your officers. That's the reason I moved it to the top of the list. When Morgan looked at the case files he flagged it as one that needed the team's intervention."

It was an opening, of sorts. Simon glanced around the restaurant, making sure no one was close enough to overhear them. "JJ, do you really believe that – " (Jim) " – one of my officers could be the killer we're looking for?"

She hesitated, taking a forkful of her salad to cover it. "The textbook answer is no. The kind of man who might become a serial killer would wash out of a police program very early. You can't hide a violent psychopathy throughout a training program designed to push buttons. Occasionally men with similar traits show up in uniform, but they would certainly never make it to detective. However..." she pushed the plate away, finished, "...this unsub is certainly an insider. We can't say for sure he's police, but we have questions."

"So ask them."

"I can't. Simon, technically you're a suspect, too. You were at Ellison's apartment that night."

It was like a kick in the stomach. He'd given a statement to Internal Affairs the previous day, just as everyone else had. IA should have no difficulty verifying his account.

JJ's look was suddenly compassionate. "Simon, I already know you're not the one. It's just that until Sheila Irwin clears you officially, I have rules to follow."

"Why are you so sure it's not me?"

"If you were guilty you'd have been monumentally stupid to call in the BAU."

Simon laughed. "Yeah, that would be crazy, wouldn't it?"

"Also, you've told me you're a career cop. I've seen you at work and I know you're proud of where you are. Your work is important to you. You resist suspecting any of your officers, but you called us in because you took an objective look at the evidence. So whether you acknowledge it aloud or not, Simon, you *know* why I'm being careful."

Simon nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, I do." If Tania Roca hadn't been so secretive about her blog, he would have been able to dismiss the possible link to his department. But even the brother who shared her apartment hadn't known what she was researching. The only people who had both pieces of information – that she was the author of *Eye on Cascade* and that she suspected a serial killer – were Sandburg, Jack Kelso, and Taggart, who had told the other cops the night of the game. Eight men, six of them cops.

JJ's expression was serious. "Simon, I promise you, as soon as IA tells me it's okay, I'll tell you everything I know. Everything."

3.26pm

Jim leaned back in his chair as the tape started rolling. It was fairly poor quality, as CCTV tapes tended to be. When would these people realise that using cheap cameras was as useless as forgetting to save the recordings altogether? The tape showed three masked figures in the vault of the bank. At first, Jim watched carefully, estimating the height and weight of the three men, but before long his mind was wandering again.

In the bullpen behind him, Agent Hotchner approached another of his team and spoke quietly before they disappeared into the conference room where all their boards were set up.

Concentrate on the bank robbery, Jim told himself firmly.

Then he heard Hotchner say: "Ellison."

Followed by Rossi's voice: "He fits the profile."

Any possibility that Jim could concentrate on the security tape fled. He kept his eyes on the screen, but his attention was elsewhere.

"Ellison," Hotchner said grimly once the door was closed.

"He fits the profile," Rossi agreed.

"But no one who knows him believes he's capable of this," JJ interrupted, with a nod toward the victim boards.

"What do we know about him?" Hotchner asked. "Garcia?"

Garcia's voice came from the speaker on the table. "James Ellison was born and raised in Cascade. Parents divorced, the father had custody. He has no criminal record in childhood, but his name does appear in a police report from 1981. He claimed he witnessed the murder of his high school football coach and could identify the killer. He later admitted he lied."

Morgan frowned. "Go back, baby-girl. Do you have any more detail on that one?"

"One moment, my lovely. The victim was Karl Heydash. He was the last victim of the Country Club Strangler."

"In 1981 Ellison would have been ten years old. He witnessed a serial killer?"

"He was eleven. It's hard to say what he saw. He told the police he'd seen the man who killed Heydash but they didn't believe him. It's hard to see why. The next day he retracted the statement so maybe he never saw anything."

"Or maybe he did. Did they catch this strangler?"

"A Wayne Hollow was arrested and charged. He never confessed and he killed himself before the trial. Case closed."

Morgan looked at Hotch. "I'm eleven years old and I see something horrible happening to someone I know. I try to do the right thing, but no one believes me. Then the cops pick up the wrong guy. That's gonna leave scars."

Prentiss nodded. "It's powerful motivation to take justice into your own hands. But this guy is a detective. That's dispensing justice. Are we really saying that's not enough?"

"Anything else in childhood, Garcia?" Hotchner said, moving them on.

"Nothing. His high school record shows a smart, athletic kid. A few fights, but nothing serious. He stayed out of trouble. There's nothing else until he enlisted in the army."

Reid picked it up. "His army service record is exemplary. He progressed through the ranks quickly and volunteered for the Rangers. After he completed that training most of the details are classified."

"That means he was black ops," Prentiss said. "Possibly CIA."

"In 1996 Ellison led an incursion into Peru against drug traffickers. His team was shot down and it was assumed they were all dead. Nearly eighteen months later the army sent a fresh team into the same area and they found Ellison. He'd been living with a local Chopec tribe."

"He went native?" Rossi asked.

"Not exactly. When the helicopter was shot down Ellison was stranded in the jungle with no way to signal for help. The local tribe took him in, but Ellison didn't assimilate with them. He recruited them to complete his mission."

"What was the mission?" Rossi pressed.

Garcia said, "All detail was redacted. Unless you want me to hack the CIA all I can tell you is it had something to do with the drug trade."

Morgan winced. "I think we can fill in those blanks without you doing twenty-to-life, mama."

Prentiss nodded. "Seek, locate, destroy."

Reid went on, "It's after he was rescued and brought back to the US that the record gets confusing."

"Confusing how?"

"The facts are straightforward. He was retired from the army on medical grounds and returned to Cascade. After a period of unemployment he applied to join Cascade PD where he was put on a fast track because of his service record. Here, his record is similarly exemplary. But I asked Garcia to dig into that medical discharge and that's what's odd."

"What's odd about it?" Morgan asked. "Eighteen months in the jungle. PTSD."

"The diagnosis isn't for PTSD. The army psychiatrist diagnosed him as schizophrenic, but there's no record he was ever prescribed anti-psychotics. Schizophrenia may get better or worse in cycles but it doesn't go away. Without medication, people around Ellison would know. He *can't* be schizophrenic."

"But he must have shown symptoms beyond what's normal for PTSD to get that diagnosis." Morgan frowned. "It doesn't make sense, Reid."

"I know what schizophrenia looks like. Ellison is hypersensitive and hypervigilant but he shows no sign of visual or auditory hallucinations, there's no confusion or disorganised thinking."

Garcia found no prescriptions so he's not on meds that would mask those symptoms. He simply functions too well in a high-stress job to be schizophrenic."

Garcia said, "I'm trying to track down the doctor who diagnosed him but he's no longer with the army. It could take a day or two."

"Keep trying," Hotchner ordered. "We should get Sheila Irwin's report today. That will tell us whether we need to focus on any of the detectives here. In the meantime, Reid, you are most likely of any of us to notice subtle signs of schizophrenia or a related disorder. Just see what you can observe. Garcia, is there anything else?"

"Two highlights," she reported. "In 2001 Ellison was engaged to Carolyn Plummer. She died a couple of weeks before the wedding. It's a horrible story."

"What happened?"

"Reading between the lines, she was being stalked. He raped her and cut her throat. Someone heard the struggle and called 911. Ellison was the first on the scene. She was DOA."

Morgan looked grim. "It's a hell of a stressor. Unless...was Ellison a suspect?"

"No."

"The other point of interest is the murder of Philip Brackley. He was a kidnap victim. At the time people thought Ellison's partner had done it, because he disappeared. Then a couple of years ago *his* body turned up in the trunk of a car. Initially, there was a lot of circumstantial evidence implicating Ellison. He wasn't guilty but he was arrested and investigated."

"Send through all the details," Hotch ordered.

"Already done," Garcia announced.

"Jim? Are you listening?"

Jim shook himself, turning his attention back to the TV screen. "Yes, of course." He hesitated, but he had no idea what Simon had been saying. He raised a hand to his head. "Uh...I'm sorry, Simon. I've got a bad headache here; I'm not very focussed. If it's okay, I'm going to find a painkiller."

Simon nodded. "Do you want to take a couple of hours? You're still recovering from that accident, Jim."

"No. No, I'll be fine. Just need an aspirin or something." To get this pain out of his neck!

How dare they investigate his childhood! And the Brackley case was over and done. Irrelevant. How would they like it if someone dug up dirt on them? Everyone had something to hide.

Everyone had *something* to hide. That was true. And two could play at that game.

He glanced at the door beyond which the agents were still talking. They were waiting for Irwin's report. That was bad for Jim. Irwin didn't like him much and if she remembered Jim was connected to Frazer's death, too, Jim was really in trouble...

Sheila Irwin hung up her phone and leaned back in her chair. She resisted the urge to rub her face with her hands; she would only smudge her make-up and make a bad day worse. On days like this, she hated her job. She reached for the glass of water on her desk and sipped it slowly. Then she turned to the computer, opened her report and began to type.

She was almost ready to save and close the file when someone knocked on her office door.

"May I come in?" Agent Prentiss peered around the door.

Sheila saved the report and beckoned the FBI agent in. "This is good timing. I was about to call you. Come in."

Emily Prentiss looked as fresh as if it was first thing in the morning. You would never know, looking at her, that she'd been working all day. Sheila pushed her envy aside.

"You have news?" Prentiss asked.

"I just finished my checks on the six officers implicated in the Roca case. Four of them are in the clear."

"Captain Banks?"

"He's clear. So are Rafe, Brown and Hinkley."

She nodded, taking a seat on the other side of Sheila's desk. "Leaving Taggart and Ellison."

"Taggart has no alibi for the afternoon Roca was killed. It was his day off; he says he was at home alone. Detective Ellison... He was working a split shift that day – something everyone was doing that week in order to cover a stakeout. That gave him the afternoon free. In his interview he told me he was at his gym until five, but that doesn't check out. According to the manager of that gym, Ellison *was* there that day. Someone called the gym at four-fifteen asking for Ellison. By then he had left. They have a record of the exact time because the caller left a message."

Prentiss took that in, her expression contemplative. "Ellison lied about his alibi."

"He may have just been mistaken. He's been through a lot lately, with that accident."

"It's possible. The way Captain Banks describes him..." Prentiss broke off as her cellphone rang. "Sorry." She answered her phone. "Prentiss...yes, I'm with her now. Okay..." She took the phone from her ear and glanced at it. "No, I need a better resolution." She turned to Sheila. "Can I use your computer?"

Sheila nodded. "Of course." She slid away from the PC, giving Prentiss access.

Prentiss moved around to the other side of the desk. Into her phone she said, "I'm logging in from a police computer. Give me a moment." She leaned over the computer, explaining as she typed. "Organised serial killers sometimes return to the scenes of their murders. It's a way to relive the event. Like a fix to tide them over until the next kill. So, we had our technical analyst pull the CCTV footage from everywhere near Tania Roca's building." She straightened. "Downloading now, Hotch. I'll get back to you." She snapped her phone closed and added, "Agent Hotchner says there are some pictures we should see."

Sheila leaned in to see the images as they downloaded onto her screen. They were typical of CCTV: monochrome and poor quality. The first three were quite fuzzy. She could make out the figure of a man, but nothing recognisable. Then she found herself staring. "Oh, my god." She looked up at Heywood. "This means..."

Prentiss nodded. "You'll need to get prints of these as soon as you can."

"He's a cop, Agent Prentiss. This is my case now."

Prentiss pocketed her phone. "We aren't here to take it from you. Him being there is suspicious but it doesn't prove anything. You'll need a confession and, trust me, if you let us help, we'll get it."

6:22pm

Simon was left with just a dial tone. He stared at the telephone in his hand. He was coming to *hate* talking to his ex-wife. He hung up the phone and stood, walking away from his desk. Frustration and stress tensed his neck and shoulders, knotting the muscles painfully. He raised a hand to his neck, trying to ease the tension. Through the glass he saw Agent Hotchner walk into the bullpen. That did not help him relax.

Simon opened his door before the agent could knock.

"Captain Banks, may I speak with you privately?" He looked very grim.

The tension was painful. "Come in." He closed the office door behind Hotchner and sat down at his desk. "Can we start with the good news?"

"Detective Irwin has cleared you and four others of suspicion in the Roca murder."

Simon relaxed a little. "About time! Wait a moment. You said *four*?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That's the bad news?"

"One man doesn't have an alibi for the afternoon Tania Roca was killed, and that's not the only evidence that implicates him. He's about to be called into IA for questioning, but I thought you deserved a warning."

"Who is it?" Simon demanded, but as he spoke he saw Irwin approaching Ellison's desk. "No - " He began to stand.

Hotchner moved, placing himself between Simon and the door. "I think you should come down to IA. You can sit in on the interview and hear the evidence for yourself."

"What evidence?"

"Not enough to prove anything. Enough to raise some serious questions. I'll be honest, I have my doubts about Ellison. But if he's innocent he should be able to answer the questions we have. This isn't a witch-hunt."

"Try telling Jim that!"

Hotchner nodded. "Yes, I'm aware of the the Brackley murder and that Ellison was falsely accused. But you know the BAU has no agenda against your friend, don't you?"

"That doesn't mean you're right."

"I haven't said I think he's the unsub. I said I have questions. Please, come and look at the evidence, then make up your own mind."

Simon had already made up his mind. He nodded and led the way from his office.

"Well. This is becoming familiar." Jim's voice dripped sarcasm.

It wasn't the first time he had faced an IA investigation. The first time was years before, and it was just a routine interview because they thought he had a motive to kill Frazer. The second was more recent, after they found his former partner's car in the river. Sheila Irwin led that investigation as well, and Jim was not happy with the way she handled it. Purely circumstantial evidence pointed to him and she jumped to a conclusion. Was she going to do the same this time?

Jim proved her wrong over Brackley's murder. He would do so again, if he had to.

This was uncomfortably public. Three IA cops sat opposite Jim. One of them, naturally, was Sheila Irwin. He met her eyes across the table and felt some satisfaction when she looked away first. Near the window, apart from the others, Agents Hotchner and Morgan sat, observing the proceedings. Simon was with them; Jim wasn't sure how he felt about Simon's presence. It would be nice to know someone in the room was on his side, but *was* Simon on his side? He initiated this investigation, after all. He invited the Feds in.

"You have the right to an attorney, Ellison. Are you sure you want to do this without counsel?"

"I want to get this over with," Jim insisted. He smiled sarcastically. "I have a hot date tonight."

"Really?"

"Yeah. A six pack in my fridge and the Jags on TV."

Simon spoke quietly. "Jim, you shouldn't do this without your lawyer."

"Detective Ellison has been advised of his rights, Captain," Irwin said frostily.

"Let's just get this done," Jim suggested.

There was a folder on the table in front of Irwin. She straightened it, but didn't open it yet. "Where were you during the afternoon on the twenty-first of January, Detective?"

Jim sighed. So it was going to be a let's-repeat-ourselves-to-death interview. Fine. "As I told you yesterday, I went off-duty at two. I spent a couple of hours at the gym..."

"At what time did you leave the gym?"

"Five thirty."

"According to the manager, Detective Ellison, you left before three-thirty."

Jim stared at her. "That's not true!"

"The gymnasium reception records show there was a telephone call for you at four-fifteen. A message was taken but they were unable to deliver it. A member of staff recalled you had been gone for almost an hour at that point."

"No..." Jim frowned, then his eyes widened. "Oh, wait." He could have kicked himself. How could he be so forgetful? "You know what, you're right. I was careless checking the load on the weights that day. I took too much and strained a muscle in my shoulder, so I cut my usual workout short. I went for a run instead." He shook his head. "I feel like such an idiot. I'd completely forgotten. I'm sorry."

"You forgot?" Irwin repeated sceptically.

"I know how it sounds to you. I've heard the same lame excuse from a hundred suspects. But you've got to believe me. I don't know how I forgot, but..."

"Detective Irwin," Simon interrupted. "Ellison suffered a major concussion in a car accident recently. It's possible his memory was affected."

Jim glanced at Simon gratefully. "Maybe that's it. A two hour workout is my normal routine. That's what I described to you yesterday. I'd completely forgotten that afternoon was different."

"I see. So instead of the gym you *now* remember you went running. Do you happen to recall where, or does your amnesia extend to that, too?"

"That's a bit harsh, Sheila. I made a mistake, that's all. I went running in Memorial park, I think."

"Was anyone with you?"

Oh, sure. Everyone jogs in a crowd. Jim could see she was intent on proving he had no alibi. He answered flatly, "There were people around. The park is a public place. But as it's obviously the answer you want, no, Detective, there isn't anyone who can verify my story. I didn't see anyone I know and it's doubtful anyone who saw me there will remember me. I was just another jogger in the park. Happy?"

"Should I be happy that you lied about your alibi? No, I'm not."

"I was mistaken."

"Yes, you were." Irwin opened the folder in front of her and withdrew three CCTV stills. She placed them on the table in front of Jim.

Jim recognised himself in the pictures. All three were taken at night, in the same location. He looked at Heywood. This was predictable.

"Is this you, Detective?" Irwin asked.

No, it's my identical twin. "Yes, it's me."

"These images were taken last night. Can you explain why you were watching Tania Roca's building?"

Jim took a deep breath. At least he could answer this one. "Probably," he said, "for the same reasons they – " he nodded toward the FBI agents " – had someone hack the CCTV." He turned to Agent Hotchner. "That's where these came from, isn't it? There are no traffic cams in that area, only business-owned CCTV."

Hotchner ignored Jim's question. "What reason would that be?" he asked.

"After the Lash case I did my homework on serial killers and behavioural profiling. I wasn't happy with the number of victims Lash managed to pile up before we got close. I learned that a serial killer often returns to the scene of a murder, and your profile, Agent Hotchner, described this killer as a stalker. So I played a hunch. I figured he wouldn't return to the actual scene, but to wherever he watched Tania before he killed her. I found the place."

Irwin shifted in her chair. "You knew IA had taken over the Roca investigation. Why didn't you bring your 'hunch' to us?"

Jim smiled. "This might shock you, Detective Irwin, but I don't trust you. I followed the lead myself because based on my own recent experience, IA wouldn't have done it right."

"Then I assume you informed your superior of your intentions."

Simon shook his head imperceptibly. Not that Jim needed the confirmation: Simon wouldn't back him on a lie. Jim answered truthfully. "No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Because the evidence implicated a cop."

"You suspected Captain Banks?"

"No, of course not! I don't believe anyone I work with is a murderer. I kept it to myself...well, because I've been wrong before."

"So you're asking us to believe that you continued an investigation you knew was unauthorised. Alone. Without backup. Looking for a serial killer." Irwin raised an eyebrow. "Didn't you think that was just a little bit dangerous?"

"It's my job. Why do *you* think I was there, Irwin?" Jim demanded impatiently. He knew what she thought; he wondered if she would have the *cojones* to say it.

"Maybe you were the one returning to the scene of your crime."

"Oh, please. Haven't we had this conversation already? I didn't kill Philip Brackley. I didn't kill Jack Prendergast. I thought you would have learned your lesson."

Irwin was silent for a moment. "You want to rake up the past? Fine," she said eventually. "When Prendergast's car was pulled out of the river with Philip Brackley's body in the trunk, I acted in accordance with procedure and the evidence I had."

"You accused me of murder."

"At no time were you charged with a crime, Ellison. When the evidence led – "

"That is so much bullshit! If I hadn't investigated on my own, you would have – "

"Enough!" Simon interrupted them both. "Irwin, you *know* Jim was innocent in that case. And, Ellison, you know she was just doing her job then, just as we all are now. You gave a false alibi, for god's sake! If one of *your* suspects did that, what would *you* think? Just answer the questions, and let's be done with this." He met Jim's eyes and held his gaze for a long moment.

Jim looked away first. "You're right. I don't like being in this chair again." He looked at Irwin. "Is there more?" he asked her, resigned to a yes.

Irwin reached into her file again. She brought out a sheet of paper and laid it over one of the photographs. "Do you recognise this?"

Jim looked at the sheet. "It looks like the fingerprint Dan Wolf found on Tania Roca's body." The print was blown up and digitally enhanced to get rid of most of the blurring. The original hadn't been good quality.

"The print was found on the victim's nail polish, correct?"

"Yes."

"Which was fresh at the time she was killed."

"Yes. It looked like she was in the middle of painting her nails when the killer found her."

"Meaning that the print can only be hers, or her killer's."

"Yes. But it's only a partial – not enough to run through the database." Jim frowned. "We all know the case details. Where are you going with this?"

Irwin laid a sheet of clear laminate over the print Jim held. The laminate was printed with another fingerprint. This one was complete. She said nothing.

Jim lined them up carefully. He looked more closely. The line-up wasn't perfect, but given the quality of the original it was very close. "It's a match. Where did you get this?" he asked, stunned. When she didn't answer at once, he looked up, meeting Irwin's eyes. "Whose print is this?" he demanded.

"It's yours, Detective Ellison."

Chapter 7

4 September 2009, 6:54pm

There was utter silence in the room following Irwin's announcement.

Jim kept his eyes on the two fingerprints. He examined every line. There were a lot of flaws in the killer's print. He had known the first time Dan showed it to him that it would be difficult to get a conviction based on this. Even so, the match was very close to the print Irwin said was his.

"This is a joke," Jim declared. "Right? It has to be a joke."

"No joke," Irwin insisted.

"Then there's some mistake."

"Can you explain how your fingerprint was found on the murder victim's body, Detective Ellison?"

Jim laid the two prints back on the table. "If this really is my fingerprint, no, I have no explanation."

"You're going to have to do better than that."

"What do you want me to say? We all know this print belongs to the person who murdered Tania Roca. It appears to match mine. Either I killed the girl, or it's not my print."

"May I see that?" Simon asked, stepping forward.

"You're here to observe, Captain. This is the third time you've interrupted."

"It will be the last, if you let me see that print. We're on the same side, aren't we? We all want to catch this killer."

Irwin gave both sheets to Simon. He went to the window and lined them up against the light. He looked closely at them. Jim waited tensely.

Finally, Simon returned to the table, giving the fingerprints back to Irwin. "The Roca print isn't complete or clear," he told her. "The areas where it's not blurred do seem to match Ellison's but that's a long way from being conclusive." He shook his head. "I'm not sure I'd be fully comfortable using this for elimination, let alone identification."

One of the other IA detectives spoke up for the first time. "Would you be saying that if the suspect wasn't one of yours, Captain Banks?"

"Take a look for yourself." Simon waited for Irwin to hand them over. "It doesn't line up. Now, that could be imaging error, but without an exact line up you'd need points of comparison. This partial isn't enough for that."

The detective dismissed Simon's opinion with a gesture. "It's too close for my comfort, Captain Banks. I have to recommend Ellison is suspended from duty, effective immediately." He looked at his colleagues.

Irwin nodded. "Detective, we'll need your badge and your gun."

It was inevitable, Jim realised. He didn't waste his breath arguing, but stood up and slammed his shield on the table. He drew his gun, pushed the catch to slide out the clip and emptied the chamber. Then he laid the unloaded gun next to his shield. "Are we done now?"

"Not nearly, Detective. Sit down."

9:35pm

They desecrated his home.

Jim was exhausted by the time he reached his door and he could tell before his key was in his hand that something was different. The place just *felt* wrong. He looked at the lock as he raised his key and saw scratches around it. Someone had forced the lock.

Instinctively he reached for his gun, but the holster was empty. Of course.

Someone broke into his apartment. Was there someone waiting inside?

There was a more likely explanation. With that fingerprint as evidence IA could have obtained a search warrant. They could have been here while Jim was being interrogated. If they had...he was in trouble.

Jim opened his door warily.

He stood in the open doorway, his fists clenched at his sides, a scream of rage building in his throat. Had someone been with Jim in that moment, someone he could blame, Jim might well have killed. This was his home, his territory. No one was supposed to enter uninvited. He choked back the cry he wanted to utter and walked in.

Everything was out of place. Cupboards had been opened. Furniture had been moved and no doubt turned inside out. They had left the place tidy enough, perhaps hoping he wouldn't notice, but to Jim's eyes the loft was a mess. The bastards had been in *everything*.

Everything?

He slammed the door closed and ran for the stairs. He near-flew up to his bedroom. They had been through this space, too. He opened his bedside drawer. The .45 was gone – no surprise there – but he wasn't looking for the gun. The well-worn photograph had been pushed to the back of the drawer, but it was there.

Jim picked up the photograph. Carolyn's beautiful smile shone up at him. *Oh, baby, I miss you so much. We should have been together all these years.*

He sank down on his bed, Carolyn's picture cradled in his hands.

September 2001

Jim stood just outside the doors of the ER. He leaned against the wall, his vision blurred with tears. He still had her blood on his hands.

After some endless time, Jim became aware of Banks' presence at his side. He turned to face his Captain. Their eyes met.

Banks didn't say "I'm sorry" or any of the trite platitudes most people would utter. Instead he simply said, "I'll drive you home, Jim."

"No."

"No?"

"You're going to the crime scene. I'm going with you."

Banks shook his head. "Jim, you can't investigate this one. You're too close and you know that."

Jim blinked to clear his vision. "Captain, we don't know each other very well yet. I'm new to your team and I realise I don't make a good first impression. But *you* know I'm the best to go over the scene." He looked down at his hands. The blood was dry and looked brown, but it was still blood. "Look, technically it's my case. I took the call. I know you'll need to reassign it in the morning but I need to do this now. Let me do my job, make sure nothing is missed. Then I'll back off."

Their eyes met again, and Jim knew that Banks understood. Would he agree?

"Alright, Jim. Just the scene." Banks was clearly reluctant.

"Thank you."

Jim's SUV was still at the scene. Banks drove them both there. Jim took in the scene from the car. Uniformed cops had held the scene and a forensics team were still there, finishing their

work. Jim tried to stay calm. To remember without feeling. It wasn't easy. Too many years had passed since Jim needed to turn off emotion like this.

He closed his eyes, but the darkness brought with it the memory of Carolyn dying in his arms. He needed something to block that out. An image came to him: a panther, hunting in the jungle. It helped. *Yes*, he thought, as the big cat appeared at his side, dark and sinuous. He opened his eyes and everything was pin-sharp and bright. He drew in a breath through his nose and almost choked on the thick, fetid stink of the alley.

"Are you sure you're up to this, Jim?" Simon asked him gently.

Jim nodded. He reached for the car door. "I'm ready."

The panther was a hunter, as he had to be, now. Jim thought back to his time in the jungle. He learned things in that year. Things that threatened his sanity. Things he was afraid – yes, afraid – to bring home with him. But he would use them now. He would use every tool available to him. Carolyn's murderer would *not* go free.

The only problem was he didn't know how to access those things any longer.

He closed the car door behind him. He hadn't slammed it, but the sound echoed in his head like a rifle shot. *Stay with me, baby, please. Carolyn? It's Jim, I'm here...*

Jim lifted the tape barrier and ducked under it. He walked toward the forensics van, calm and focussed. The smell of her blood still permeated the area, enough that he nearly gagged on it.

Will Goslinn was leading the CSU team. Jim called his name.

Goslinn looked around. "Jim?"

"I need to borrow some gloves."

"Jim, why are you here?"

Will was a friend; on another night Jim would have been kinder. But his patience was at an end. "To do my job," he snapped. "Banks cleared it. Now give me some fucking gloves!"

Will reached into the van and held the box of latex gloves out to Jim. Wisely, he didn't take issue with Jim's choice of language. "Jim...I'm sorry. I mean, we all are..."

"Later, Will. What have you got?"

"I won't know for sure until we get analysis onto it. We found some hairs, some fibres, but most of it will probably be Ca- " he stumbled over her name, finally adding, " – hers." He took a deep breath. "We do have the weapon used..."

"I want to see that."

"I sent it on ahead to Ryan at the lab. It was a knife, about six inches. Kitchen blade. If there's anything to be found, Ryan will find it. We all want to solve this, Jim."

These were Carolyn's friends and colleagues; of course they wanted to solve it. Jim nodded. "I know," he acknowledged, his voice softer. He pulled on the gloves. "Can I take a couple of bags? Just in case I find something."

"Sure." Goslinn handed over some evidence bags without further comment.

Jim thanked him and turned to look at the scene. He paid little attention to the surroundings earlier; now he took in every detail. It was a thoroughfare between the buildings with fire-escapes crawling up the walls on both sides and three large dumpsters making the alley too narrow for most cars. There was a lot of garbage scattered around. The asphalt was wet with rain.

Behind him, Jim heard Banks talking to one of the cops. He made an effort to tune out their voices and concentrated on the scene in front of him.

Why had Carolyn been here? The scene was a few blocks away from her apartment, so perhaps she was on her way home, but she wouldn't come into a dark alley alone. Would she?

Jim examined every inch of the alley. By focussing his attention on the details of the scene and refusing to remember who the victim was, Jim slowly reconstructed the crime. She had been walking in the direction of Western, which meant she was going home. He could find no signs to confirm there was someone with her, but in his own mind he was sure. Carolyn wouldn't have walked this way alone. When she reached the first dumpster something happened, because she dropped her shopping bag. Jim found traces of the wet and torn bag on the ground where it fell, as well as the more obvious signs: the things that scattered from the dropped bag. Most significant, a bag of sugar had broken open on impact. The trail of sugar grains might have provided some clues, but others had trampled it. Jim hoped they'd thought to photograph it first.

Carolyn had moved further into the alley. Was she running? That was Jim's guess. Then, just past the last of the three dumpsters, someone grabbed her. There were strands of her hair caught in the fire escape and marks on the wall beneath it.

Jim's mind shied away from visualising what happened next. He had to force himself to confront it. She must have been screaming for help, because someone called 911. They would need to find that witness.

Jim was kneeling on the wet ground beneath the fire escape when Simon reached him. "Jim?"

It took Jim a moment to find his voice. "He raped her, Simon." He heard the raw edge to his voice and swallowed hard. He had to hold together.

"I know," Simon answered quietly.

"Right here. He put a knife to her throat and raped her. I...I don't think he intended to kill. But he cut her anyway. He didn't care. And he ran. This way..." Jim got up and started to walk.

Simon followed him.

There was garbage all over the ground: empty beer cans, used pizza boxes, household waste and rotting food. It was as if one of the dumpsters had been emptied into the street.

"Here, Simon." Jim pointed. "See where someone tripped. There's blood on the ground here, from his hands. And here..." He pointed to some of the scattered garbage, "that's the way he went. It must have been seconds before I got here. Just seconds." If he'd only driven faster, if he'd only known...

"Good work. I'll get uniform on a house-to-house." Simon nodded to himself, looking at the signs Jim pointed out. "Jim, you should go home now. You've done all you can."

But he hadn't. Jim shook his head. "I want to call in at the lab first. Goslinn told me they found a knife." Simon started to object, but Jim interrupted him. "I need to see it through, Captain. I'll visit the lab then write up a report so whoever takes over in the morning will have everything. Then I can go home."

Simon looked worried, but he nodded. "I must be crazy, but alright. *If* you'll agree to take a couple of days off. I want you to take some personal time. I think you need it."

It was the last thing he needed, but Jim would have agreed to anything to be able to finish his work. He nodded. "Agreed."

By the time he reached Cascade PD, Jim was beginning to realise this was a bad idea. He parked in the underground garage and the stark white walls reflected blinding light. He raised a hand to cover his eyes as he got out of his truck and could still see Carolyn's blood under his fingernails and in the creases of his knuckles. His head ached and he felt sick. He headed for the nearest men's room to wash up: something he should have done long before. The men's room mirror showed him more than he bargained for: his clothing, too, was saturated with blood. His sweater was pale blue and showed the blood starkly under the harsh lighting. His jacket was still in the truck.

No wonder people were giving him odd looks.

Jim ignored the looks and took the elevator to forensics. He wasn't sure why it was so important for him to see the weapon. It was just a gut feeling. He had learned to trust his gut.

In the lab, he found three people working. Two were women – Jim recognised Laurie Montez but not the other. The third person was Ryan Frazer. All three looked up as he walked in. Laurie gasped in fright.

Jim made a calm-down gesture. "I know, I didn't stop to change. Sorry."

Frazer approached him. "D-detective Ellison. What are you doing here?"

Jim wasn't in the mood to be questioned and certainly not by Frazer. He didn't like the little lab-monkey. He was nervous around Jim lately: they'd had a minor confrontation a few weeks earlier and Jim felt a certain satisfaction that the man remembered it. But that stutter was going to get irritating.

"I'm investigating a murder," Jim told Frazer curtly.

"Yes, but – "

"No buts. I was on the scene. It's my case until Banks reassigns it. I want to see the weapon." Frazer looked like he was about to object again and Jim barked, "Now!"

Frazer scurried away, returning with a plastic evidence bag containing a bloody knife. He handed it to Jim.

Jim took the bag, anger and grief flooding through him. It was a kitchen knife, as Will said, wooden handled. There was a lot of blood on both the blade and the handle. Jim saw no clear prints but there were definitely smudges of fingers. He guessed the perp wore gloves. Damn.

"Stay with me, baby, please. Carolyn? It's Jim, I'm here. You'll be okay, just...oh, god, baby, please hold on."

He could still *smell* her. Oh, god, it was too much.

Jim raised the bag to the light. There was a mark on the handle, a manufacturer's logo, perhaps. He looked past the knife to Frazer's face. The frightened-rabbit expression was getting irritating. The man even had a nervous tic above his eye.

And then the pieces came together. Jim knew who murdered his Carolyn.

All he had to do was prove it.

It wouldn't be easy. Fighting to keep the gesture casual, Jim handed the evidence back to Frazer. "Thanks. One last thing. Have you seen Carolyn today? Did she come here at all?"

"N-no. Her shift ended before mine began." Frazer turned to the two women. "D-did you s-see her?"

Laurie answered, "She came by this morning to chase up the analysis on the Torres case. Is it important?"

"I don't know yet. It could be." Jim thanked her and hurried out of the lab.

He just made it to the men's room before he threw up.

4 September 2009, 11:37pm

There were things he should be doing, Jim knew. His search of the loft had been as thorough as the Feds' had been. He knew everything they had touched. He knew what they took. He wasn't sure where that would lead them next. The Feds seemed determined to pin the murders on him. Jim knew they couldn't *prove* him guilty, but all they really needed was a circumstantial case. And what they might find while building it troubled him.

He should be taking care of it.

Jim turned off all of the lights in the loft and walked out onto the balcony. Sure enough, there was a black Ford in the street below. There were two men inside: the same two he spotted at the Roca girl's apartment. He could probably lose them if he tried...but if he did that they'd be all the more certain he was guilty.

There was one thing he could do.

Jim changed into dark clothing and sneakers. He jogged to the nearest ATM and withdrew three hundred bucks. Then he headed on down the hill. There was an all-night diner at the bottom of Prospect. Jim ordered coffee and a burger then made a call from the payphone in the corner. He was lucky: the call was answered.

Forty three minutes later he heard a motorcycle outside the diner. He glanced out and grinned. Black Harley, black helmet, black leather jacket...and purple pyjamas. Fingers had dropped everything to come out here.

Jim put all of his cash on the table as Fingers sat down.

"What do you need?"

Fingers was a computer nut. He'd hacked into Cascade PD – just for giggles – and turned CI to avoid charges. Jim didn't know how good the kid really was. He'd been caught, after all. But he was the only option Jim had.

Jim passed him a paper napkin on which he'd written the names of the six FBI agents. "I need information. Anything that will give us a little leverage."

"Dirt?"

"If it's there. Or personal stuff. But I need it fast."

Fingers shoved the napkin into one pocket and Jim's cash in the other. "I'll call you in the morning."

"No, not on the phone. Call me and hang up. I'll meet you here."

"You're the boss, boss."

5 September 2009, 8:30am

Simon knocked on Jim's door at 8.30 sharp.

He had been awake all night. The evidence against Jim Ellison was a long way from being conclusive, but Simon understood why the BAU agents were so close to being convinced. He was beginning to share their doubts.

The alibi was an odd one: if Jim genuinely *had* forgotten what he was doing that afternoon, why wasn't he more worried about the gap in his memory? Simon expected him to seek out a doctor right away, but he hadn't mentioned any such intention. Was it *possible* Jim knowingly lied, assuming that the gym staff would confirm his usual routine?

On the other hand, Jim's explanation for watching the Roca girl's apartment rang true. Ellison had always been a maverick. He wouldn't work with a partner like any other cop. This wouldn't be the first time he'd continued an investigation unauthorised. But why hadn't he mentioned it to Simon? If not before, then why not after he'd found something? When Irwin was questioning him, Jim said, *I played a hunch he wouldn't return to the actual scene, but to wherever he watched Tania before he killed her. I found the place.* If Jim discovered the place where Tania Roca's murderer watched her apartment, why hadn't he said something? They should have sent a CSU team out there to go over every inch of the place.

The fingerprint, of course, was the most damning evidence, but it wasn't the thing Simon cared about. Jim's answer to that one was simply correct: if it really *was* his print, then he was guilty. So it couldn't be his. QED.

Simon was about to knock for a second time when Jim opened the door. He was wearing sweat pants and nothing else. He had not shaved. His chest and arms were covered with a sheen of sweat; he must have been exercising. When he saw Simon standing there he stood back to let him enter, but said nothing.

"Hello, Jim," Simon said, walking into the apartment.

Jim slammed the door closed behind him. "Did you know?" he demanded.

Simon knew he meant the search, so he answered calmly. "No."

"But you know now."

"JJ told me when you left the department that they had a search warrant. It wasn't hard to figure out that's why Irwin kept you in IA for so long. But I don't know what they found, if anything."

Jim smiled humourlessly. "So it's JJ. She got close to you fast."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jim. She's half my age and has a son with her partner."

He shrugged. "Here to arrest me, Captain?"

"I'm here to talk."

"Outside," Jim answered curtly. He walked past Simon toward the balcony.

Simon followed him, removing his coat. "Aren't you being a little paranoid?"

"The Feds searched my apartment. They've been watching my building. My phone is wired. No, I don't think I'm being paranoid." Jim turned, leaning on the balcony rail. "I didn't find a bug, but that doesn't mean there isn't one. So, talk."

"Jim, what's going on?"

It was the best question Simon had, but Jim only shook his head.

Simon tried again. "I know you're hiding *something*. In that interview yesterday you were being very careful. All you had to do was say you didn't kill the girl. You didn't say it. Hotchner noticed and so did I. Were you *trying* to make yourself a suspect?"

"They already suspect me, Simon."

"And you damn-near confirmed it!"

"What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

Simon shook his head in frustration. "Jim, we're friends. I can't help you if you won't tell me the truth."

"You *can't* help me, Simon. Not this time."

"No, that's not good enough, Jim. I've been turning this thing over in my head for too long. I think I know what's going on, Jim, so I want a truthful answer from you. I give you my word, I won't repeat this conversation to anyone, not even under oath, if it comes to that."

"You don't want that answer, Simon."

"Yes. I do. One question, Jim. You owe me this much."

He saw Jim shiver as the breeze from the bay caught his damp skin. Jim turned away from Simon, looking out over the bay. Finally he nodded. "Alright."

And now the moment was there, Simon realised Jim was right: he *didn't* really want the answer he suspected he was going to get. He forged ahead anyway. "Does this have something to do with Frazer?"

Jim's shoulders tensed and Simon, noting the movement, knew he had his answer.

"You know who killed him, don't you?"

Jim turned back, meeting Simon's eyes. "Yes. I know who killed Ryan Frazer." The admission hurt him; pain creased the corners of his eyes, turned down his mouth.

It was the puzzle piece that made sense of all the rest. Although he had expected it, Simon found himself blindsided by the notion that Jim could have known the identity of a murderer for *eight years* and said nothing. It took him a moment to reorient his thinking.

"Son of a... All these years, you knew?"

"Simon, I wanted Frazer dead. I wanted him dead more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. *Except her*. You have no idea how that feels. Be glad you don't."

There was really nothing Simon could say to that. Jim was right – he couldn't claim to know what Jim went through when Carolyn died. Simon was a witness to it; he understood that Jim might have been willing to let Frazer's killer go free. In the emotional rollercoaster of that week, yes, it made sense, however unlikely it was for Jim under normal circumstances.

But not now. Not when they had a serial killer on their hands.

"Jim...is whoever killed Frazer responsible for the other murders?"

Jim's expression became closed. "I can't answer that. Not yet."

"Damn it, Ellison, you can't – "

"I don't have a choice, Simon!" Jim moved away from him, looking out over the bay again. "But thanks," he added.

"For what?"

"For not assuming it was me." He sighed heavily. "What happens now? Are they going to call me in again today?"

"I don't know, but probably not today. So far IA is concentrating on the Roca case, so I'm going to ask one of the guys to look into any links you might have with the others."

"Why?" Jim turned quickly.

"Because the case against you in the Roca murder is purely circumstantial, and without a motive it's too shaky to go anywhere. As far as I know, Jim, you don't have a motive to kill the girl."

We've all been assuming this serial killer murdered Tania Roca. So if we can prove that's not you the most likely motive goes up in smoke." Of course, Jim had just admitted to Simon that he was an accessory to a different murder, and a lot of people would consider that sufficient motive. This was becoming a bigger mess with every moment that passed.

"What if you can't prove it?" Jim asked.

"Nine murders, Ellison. You can't possibly have no alibi for all of them. There should be some physical evidence we can use to eliminate you, too. It doesn't have to be airtight."

Jim nodded. "Okay. What can - " He broke off as the phone interrupted, but it rang only once. Jim glanced at it sharply, then turned back to Simon. "What can I do?"

"You can start by telling me who killed Frazer."

"I can't."

"Then the best thing you can do is stay away from the investigation."

"But..."

"This isn't like the Brackley case, Jim. If you get involved, it's going to look like you're trying to cover something up. Especially in light of what you've just told me. You can't afford that."

"Simon..."

"I know how you feel, but you're going to have to trust me and the others to bring this home. Take a couple of days. See a doctor about that memory lapse."

"I'm going to. This morning."

"Good. I hope the doc can back you up on this one. We'll keep you in the loop, Jim. Now I've got to go to work."

Simon headed out. He was not looking forward to the day.

Chapter 8

5 September 2009, 9:35am

Waking up with a warm body spooned around his was nice. No, more than nice, Blair decided, turning his head slightly to look at Matt. Matt's arm tightened around Blair's chest and he mumbled something in his sleep. Blair smiled to himself. He raised a hand to touch his lover's rough cheek.

Matt stirred, snuggling closer to Blair. Blair turned to kiss his cheek and Matt sleepily tilted his head up, offering his mouth. Blair kissed him deeply, loving the simple trust in that gesture. He raised himself up a little, sliding his arms around Matt's body, kissing along his unshaven jaw line, down to the pulse point in his neck. He felt Matt respond and began to hump slowly against his thigh.

Matt groaned. "God, look at the time."

"Oh, no, baby, please..."

"We have to get up..."

"Man, I *am* up..."

"Blair..."

He groaned. "Okay, okay." Reluctantly, Blair rolled onto his back, letting Matt get up. He glanced at the clock: it read 09:36. Oh, hell, Matt was right. Time to get out of bed.

He stayed where he was, though, clasping his hands behind his head and watching Matt move around the room. He obsessed about the way the light caught the highlights in Matt's hair. Gorgeous.

Was this love? Naomi would tell him, *If you're not sure, Sweetie, the answer is no.* Then again, Naomi was wrong about a lot of things. Blair felt more for this man than he could remember feeling for anyone before.

Matt wanted Blair to meet his parents that evening. Blair had agreed, but he was nervous about the meeting. He wondered if he was expected to return the favour. He wondered how Matt would react to Naomi.

"You're looking serious," Matt commented, fastening his bath robe.

Blair shrugged. "Just stressing about tonight."

"Nervous?" Matt sat down on the edge of the bed, leaning over Blair. "It's not like we're announcing our engagement. I just want them to meet the guy I've been talking about for the past three weeks."

Blair shook himself. "Man, you must think I'm crazy."

Matt grinned. "A little. My kind of crazy." His expression became serious. "Um. About tonight. Don't be too surprised if mom wants to talk about Tania. She's still...broken up."

As was Matt, though he hid it well. Blair reached up, caressing Matt's neck. "Your whole family is. I feel like I'm intruding."

"No. You're family too."

"There he is." Morgan nodded toward the door of 852 Prospect.

He and Prentiss were in a bureau SUV across the street when Ellison, dressed for exercise, left the apartment building. Ellison gave no sign he knew they were there. He walked about twenty metres before he crossed the road and then broke into a run, heading down the hill.

Morgan started the car and followed Ellison at a discreet distance. Ellison was too smart to lead them to evidence, but at least if they stayed on him no one would get hurt. The killer they were looking for was a housecleaner and Morgan vividly remembered cases with similar profiles. Sixty eight victims in Kansas City. More than a hundred abducted from Detroit and murdered at that pig farm in Canada. So far they had less than twenty victims in Cascade, but a housecleaner would not stop killing until he was stopped. If Ellison was stalking his next victim, Morgan intended to be there to stop him.

"He's not going to the gym," Prentiss commented. She had lost their coin-toss, so was dressed in jogging sweats and Nikes. If Ellison's run took him somewhere the car couldn't follow, she would stay on him.

Morgan felt the tension tighten his shoulders. Ellison was a member of the gym nearest his home, a gym that kept everything, including entry and exit logs, on a computer. Any computer connected to the internet was an open book to Penelope Garcia running her background checks. Extracting Ellison's record was easy. He spent a minimum of two hours at the gym almost every day. If he wasn't going there, perhaps he did have something other than exercise in mind.

For about forty minutes they followed Ellison as he ran in the general direction of the bay. Then he entered a large open park. Prentiss followed him while Morgan found somewhere to leave the SUV. He called in to let the team know where they – and Ellison – were. Then he headed into the park in case Prentiss needed backup.

Blair spent the morning working on his dissertation. He was pleased with what he was accomplishing. If he could keep going at this rate, he might be finished by the end of the year. He thought the case he was building in support of Burton's original sentinel monograph was strong. He had identified a spiritual culture that seemed to centre on sentinels and, based on his work in Peru and Paraguay, gathered enough evidence to suggest that there might still be sentinels among the tribes that still existed. It was more than he expected to accomplish when he began his doctorate.

All that was left was to organise the work into a format that would be acceptable to his committee. That was no small task, but Blair was enjoying the challenge. He was going to be successful.

By lunchtime Blair was ready to take a break. He had no classes that day and wasn't meeting Matt until evening, so he could take a leisurely lunch. He boiled water in his office and filled a thermos flask with herbal tea – his own blend – threw the flask into a backpack, bought a couple of sandwiches from the café on campus and headed out to the park to eat.

Ellison ran two full circuits of the park before Prentiss gave up. Oh, she was physically fit and could have kept going, but why bother when she had backup? So as she reached the fountain where Morgan loitered she slowed down and let him take over the task of following their suspect.

Morgan wasn't dressed for running. He could run, but he'd be conspicuous and the point of this exercise was to be discreet. So instead he followed the path at a brisk walk, keeping his eyes on Ellison from a distance. So far he'd followed the running trail and in the open space it wasn't hard to keep track. If Ellison wanted to lose them, though, this was his opportunity.

The park was fairly busy: men and women eating sandwiches on park benches, parents with babies in strollers and dogs on long leashes walking their owners.

Ellison looked like he was going for a third circuit, but this time as he reached the summit of the park he stopped running. There was a paved space with three long benches surrounded by a rail. On one side was a steep drop-off, almost a cliff; on the other, the gentler slope of the running trail. Ellison went through a series of stretches, which gave Morgan a chance to catch up, then stood at the rail above the steepest part, gazing out over the bay below.

Morgan selected a bench lower down the slope where he had a clear field of view and sat down. He called Prentiss.

"Looks like he's done."

"Are you heading back?"

"Not yet. He's loitering at the summit. Could be waiting for someone."

"Okay. I'm back at the car. Let me know if you need backup."

"Will do, Emily."

Blair loved Memorial Park. He loved its twisting paths that went nowhere, its stone benches and the ocean view. Even in the rain – which, truthfully, was most days in Cascade – it was a good place to sit and think.

He found his favourite bench and sat down to unwrap his sandwich. The stone was a little damp from the earlier rain but the weather had cleared up and the view from the park was spectacular: the grass and trees glistened with what remained of the rain and the ocean was deeply blue and sparkling. It was warm for the time of year, but there were few people around. Blair saw a woman jogging, the tinny sound of her iPod headphones reaching Blair as she passed him. There was a man in jogging clothes, standing on the terrace looking out over the ocean, and a couple walking a barking dog some distance away. Blair looked out over the water, idly wondering what the man was watching. He saw two ships out there: one large freighter just leaving the docks, the other much further out to sea. The view was lovely; he wished he could share it with Matt.

What was he going to do about Matt? If it wasn't going to work, now was the time to break things off, before it became too difficult.

Who was he kidding? He was falling in love with Matt. He looked forward to the end of each day because he would be seeing Matt. He answered every phone call with a smile because there was a chance it could be him.

Matt wanted Blair to meet his family. That had to mean he was hoping their relationship would last.

Blair was nearing the end of his doctorate. He was almost certain Rainier would keep him on, and with luck he could get tenure in a few years. There were several sources he could approach to fund the next stage of his sentinel research. Perhaps it *was* time he thought about settling down in his personal life as well.

The very thought was alien. There was too much of Naomi in him, Blair reflected as he finished his lunch. He *could* settle down with Matt. Make a life together. It would be so easy. But what if he woke up one morning and just had to leave? It was what *she* did, every time they found a stable home during Blair's tempestuous childhood. It was wrong, just wrong, to start a relationship knowing it could end that way.

What was he going to do?

The tea was hot and he poured a cup from his thermos and sipped it slowly. The man on the terrace was still there. Blair frowned. It looked as if he hadn't moved a muscle all the time Blair was eating. That was weird. Blair gulped down his tea, burning his mouth, and stashed the thermos in his backpack. He looked more closely at the man and realised he was familiar. Ellison. The detective. He debated for a moment then shrugged to himself and walked over to the terrace.

There was no sign Ellison was aware of his approach. It was almost as if he was asleep, but that couldn't be. Horses might sleep standing up, but not men.

"Are you okay, man?" Blair asked him.

There was no response.

Blair reached out to grasp Ellison's upper arm. "Detective?"

Ellison jerked as if waking from a deep sleep. He rounded on Blair instantly.

Blair leaped back, raising both hands in an "I'm harmless" gesture. "Whoa, man, it's okay. Stay cool."

Ellison shook his head in apparent confusion. "I was..." he began. The words seemed to stick in his throat. He tried to clear his throat and it turned into a cough. Ellison's eyes met Blair's for an instant; he raised a hand as if to communicate but he was still trying to catch his breath. He couldn't breathe.

Blair didn't stop to think about it. He moved closer and slapped Ellison on the back, supporting him with his other hand. "Breathe, man."

Ellison fell to his knees in the grass. Slowly, the coughing fit passed.

Blair reached for his thermos and offered it to Ellison. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, thanks." Ellison's voice was hoarse. He took the flask from Blair, opened it and raised it to his mouth. He didn't drink. He looked at Blair quizzically. "What's in this?"

"It's herbal tea. All natural ingredients, man."

Ellison drank. He cleared his throat and drank again. Then he handed back the flask. "Thanks. I don't know what happened." He shifted to a sitting position.

The ground was damp but if Ellison didn't care, Blair didn't. He sat down. "It looked like...I'm not sure. Glad I could help."

Ellison was frowning at him. "I know we've met, but..."

"Blair Sandburg. You interviewed me when Tania Roca was killed."

The frown smoothed out. "Of course." Ellison's blue eyes swept the area. "What are you doing here?"

"Eating lunch." Blair waved the thermos. "You - uh - you don't look well, man. How long were you standing there?"

"It couldn't have been long..." Ellison glanced at his watch. Blair saw his eyes widen slightly and knew Ellison had been there much longer than he thought. Ellison covered quickly, raising his hand to his forehead as if he had a headache. He rubbed at his temples for a moment then turned toward Blair. "That herbal stuff is good. It doesn't need the honey, though."

It was a clumsy change of subject, but Blair knew he had no right to interrogate this man. They were strangers. Ellison's words, meant as a distraction, caught Blair's attention in a way he almost certainly didn't intend.

Blair's jaw dropped. "You could taste honey?" He knew exactly what was in the tea because he made it himself: lime flowers, orange and lemon zest, lemon grass and a little liquorice root to deepen the flavour. Blair didn't add honey for himself, but Matt preferred it sweet, so the last batch Blair made he'd added a little honey. And that morning he'd been sloppy and not rinsed out the flask before refilling it. If there was still some of the old tea in the bottom, it couldn't have been much. If Ellison could detect such a trace amount of honey, Blair *had* to get to know this man!

Ellison returned his look. "Yeah. Why?"

Tread carefully, Blair... "You must have an amazing sense of taste, man. There's not enough honey in there to taste. At least, I didn't think so." He hesitated, then forged onward. "Are all your senses that sharp?"

"I don't have any problems."

"But do you often taste things other people can't? Or smell, maybe?"

Ellison's frown deepened. "What is this?"

"It's...my field of study, sort of. At the university. I didn't mean to come on strong, man."

"I hope you don't treat everyone you meet like a lab rat."

That was a bit harsh, but Blair nodded, accepting the criticism. "Chill out. I'll back off." Blair opened the thermos and took a sip. No, he definitely couldn't detect the honey. Now it was Blair's turn to grope for a change of subject. There was only one other thing he knew they had in common. "Look, I know you probably can't tell me anything, but are you any closer to finding who killed Tania?"

Ellison hesitated. "You know I can't discuss an ongoing investigation."

Blair sighed, turning away slightly to avoid those piercing eyes. "I know, man, but...this is so hard! Not knowing who killed her or even why! It's tearing her family up. They need some kind of closure."

"What are you – my conscience now?" Ellison muttered.

"Huh?"

Ellison shrugged. "Just – you're right. I can get so focussed on the police work I forget there are people involved. And you're right, Sandburg. The people who loved Tania deserve some kind of justice." He hauled himself to his feet. "I have to go. Thanks for the chat."

Blair scrambled up. "Detective, I *would* like to talk to you about your senses. I'm not gonna push but if you change your mind, call me at Rainier. Anthropology department."

Ellison surprised him by saying, "I'll think about it."

"Prentiss, take a look at this." Morgan snapped a photo with his cellphone and forwarded it to her before returning the phone to his ear. He began to walk, casually, toward the summit.

At first he had paid little attention to the others on the summit. It looked like the usual lunchtime crowd for a park this size. But when the young man approached Ellison, he wondered. It could have been innocent. But both had been on the summit, ignoring each other, for some time. That meant that, if this was a planned meeting, it was suspicious.

It was probably nothing.

"Morgan," Prentiss said sharply, "that's Blair Sandburg. He's the one who found Tania Roca's body."

Morgan picked up his pace. "Any reason to suspect him?"

"None."

"Then what's going on here?" Morgan wondered aloud. If this wasn't a planned meeting the kid could be in danger. He was a key witness in the Roca case. Morgan did not draw his weapon, but he was suddenly more aware of its weight as he walked.

He kept his eyes on the two men. They stood close together at the rail. He saw Ellison hand a flask to the younger man and realised that Ellison had been running without carrying water. He saw Ellison shift position, placing himself between Morgan and Sandburg. It would be so easy for Ellison to pitch the kid over the edge...

Morgan found himself running, reaching for his gun. He was too far away.

He drew a breath to call out.

In the same moment, Ellison moved aside and the kid turned his back on him, stuffing the flask into his backpack as he walked away.

Ellison watched him go, an odd expression on his face. Then his gaze turned to Morgan.

Morgan met his steely gaze. Ellison had known they were watching the whole time.

Jim turned the truck into the parking lot beneath the Police HQ building. It was automatic; he always parked there when he was working. Today he wasn't here to work.

He backed into a parking space, shut off the engine and removed the keys. He weighed the keys in his hand for a moment, considering several options. The keyring was very full: his car keys, apartment keys, the key to his locker at the gym, various keys he needed for work, and more. Jim removed one key from the bunch. There was a roll of duct tape on the seat beside him. He tore off a strip and carefully taped the key underneath the steering column where it couldn't be seen.

It might not make a difference. On the other hand, it could make all the difference in the world.

Jim pocketed the rest of his keys and got out of the truck.

"Joel, are you saying Kraemer deserved to die?"

"No one," Taggart mumbled into his beer bottle, "deserves to die like that." He met Jim's eyes, his expression hard. "But I do think he deserved twenty years hard time."

That was Joel. Clear sighted and consistent. He wouldn't set his own moral standards above the law, or conceal a criminal's identity. He hated to see a guilty man get off on some technicality, but when it happened he went on and did his job. Joel was a good cop...and a good friend.

Another memory: splitting the last beer with Brown the night they all gathered at the loft to watch the game. Brown made some sort of joke about beer and popcorn. It bothered Jim that he couldn't remember it.

"Go ahead, Jim. I've got your back." Rafe, the day before the game. It was an attempted robbery at one of the Cascade banks. Rafe responded to Jim's request for backup and they went in before the patrol cars showed up. One of the gang panicked and there was a brief shoot-out. Rafe saved Jim's life.

"Jim, we're friends. I can't help you if you won't tell me the truth."

"You can't help me, Simon. Not this time."

What Jim was about to do would destroy those friendships. People say it's at times like this you find out who your real friends are. But Jim knew his friends: all of them were good cops. Maybe there would be something left to salvage when this was over but he couldn't hope for much.

"Son of a... All these years, you knew?"

Yeah, Simon might accept it. Maybe.

He remembered Tania Roca's funeral: the mother's tears flowing silently as she threw flowers on the coffin. The heaviness in her movements as she turned away from the freshly-dug grave, another of her children supporting her. The father, last to leave the graveside, a lone figure of grief.

"Man, this is so hard! Not knowing who killed her or even why! It's tearing her family up. They need some kind of closure."

"You're right, Sandburg. The people who loved Tania deserve some kind of justice."

Ever since Heywood or Irwin matched the fingerprint to Jim, part of him had been in a kind of panic. Sandburg's words cut through his selfishness to the truth. An innocent woman was dead. Her family deserved justice.

That was what Jim fought for, wasn't it? Justice.

It was a moment of stark clarity, when Jim saw how skewed his priorities had become.

He was a cop. It was his job to find the thieves and the drug dealers, the gangsters and the murderers.

He was a protector, sworn to keep the people of this city safe. People like Tania.

And he was more.

Jim took a deep breath and set off to find Detective Irwin.

From the car, Blair looked up at the house. He was back to feeling out of his depth. The Roca family home was in an expensive neighbourhood. Each property was unique. The Roca house wasn't the largest on the street but it was still impressive: a faux-colonial house with rose bushes lining the drive.

Blair adjusted his shirt collar and found himself wishing he owned a tie.

Matt reached across from the passenger seat and squeezed Blair's thigh. "Relax, Blair. They're going to love you." His hand moved to Blair's shoulder then cupped the back of his neck. "Just as I do," he added.

Blair leaned across the gearshift and kissed Matt. "Thanks, man."

"Let's go in."

Matt headed to the door while Blair locked the car. Blair glanced up at the sky; it was a clear night, stars shining out brightly. He heard Matt ring the doorbell and hurried to join him.

The door was answered quickly by a woman who could only be Matt's mother. Blair saw Tania in her clearly, though her features had a more strongly Asian cast than her children. He remembered her from Tania's funeral but they hadn't spoken then. She was wearing a dress printed with flowers and high-heeled shoes. Her hair was long and straight, brushed to a shine and worn loose down her back. Blair saw no sign of grey in her hair. She opened her arms to Matt and he hugged her briefly.

"Mom, this is Blair."

Mrs Roca turned her smile to Blair and he wondered why he had been worried. "I'm honoured, Mrs Roca."

She offered him her hands. "Please, call me Lien. Come inside. Our home is yours." Her accent gave away that she was not a native speaker of English, but Blair had no trouble understanding her.

Matt gave him an I-told-you-so look as Blair, much more at ease, followed them into the house.

Anthony "call me Tony" Roca was as welcoming as his wife. He actually said "Welcome to the family" leading Blair to wonder just what Matt had told them all about their relationship. It was refreshing, though. No one pretended Blair was just a friend to Matt. Lien Roca was clearly comfortable with her son's sexuality. Tony seemed a little less so, but Blair didn't feel blamed or resented.

Over dinner Lien did talk about Tania and Blair was glad Matt warned him. He told them about his brief relationship with Tania, glossing over most of the details. He was able to paint a picture of the happy, dedicated woman she had been; he hoped it helped.

Partway through dinner there was a phone call. Tony left the table to answer it. Matt kept talking, and Blair didn't give the call any real thought.

But when Tony came back into the room, Blair could see from his face something was wrong.

It was Matt who asked. He rose from the table, walking toward his father. "Dad...what is it?"

"That was the police on the phone," Tony told them. Matt's chair was beside Lien's; Tony sat down there, reaching for Lien's hands. "He said they've found him, darling. They've got the man who killed our baby."

Chapter 9

5 September 2009, 3:54pm

Captain Simon Banks looked around his office, meeting the eyes of each of his officers in turn. Faces of friends and colleagues. Some of them he had worked with for years: Taggart, Brown. Others were relatively new, Rafe was the newest recruit to Major Crimes. They were a tight-knit group. All of them men Simon trusted. Men he believed he knew.

After today, Simon would never fully trust any of them again. Not because of anything they had done but because he could no longer completely trust his own judgement.

Simon cleared his throat, searching for the words. "This morning, I told you all that Jim is suspected of murder. I know you've all been working hard today..."

"We're all on Jim's side, Simon," Rafe announced. He was leaning back against the window. There were murmurs and nods of agreement all around.

Simon wished for a cigar. And a stiff drink. Later. "There's been a development. Two hours ago...two hours ago Jim came in and asked to speak with Detective Irwin. She asked me to witness the interview." Simon found himself watching all of them as he spoke. "It's difficult to believe, but Jim Ellison confessed to the murder of Tania Roca."

"What?" That was Taggart.

Simon met Taggart's eyes. "He was arrested and will be formally charged tomorrow. I listened to Jim's story myself and I have to tell you I can't think of any reason he would lie."

The room was utterly silent. Simon knew how they felt. He saw in their faces the same things he had felt, listening to Jim's confession. Shock and disbelief...and this was only the beginning.

Finally, it was Rafe who voiced the question on everyone's mind. "Captain...what about the other murder cases? Are you saying that Ellison is...our serial killer?"

2:00 pm (Two Hours Earlier)

"I killed Tania Roca."

Simon was glad he had placed himself behind Jim this time; he couldn't completely cover his reaction. Neither could Sheila Irwin; her eyes widened with shock. Agent Morgan, who sat at Simon's side, showed no surprise at all.

Jim was looking straight ahead, at Irwin. "What's wrong, Sheila? It's what you wanted to hear, isn't it? I killed Tania Roca."

Irwin recovered quickly. "Why?" she asked, her voice a lot calmer than she appeared.

Jim shook his head. "Why doesn't matter," he answered.

But it did matter. *Why* was the most important thing. Jim was going to have to answer the question sooner or later.

"I think it matters," Irwin insisted.

"I watched her apartment from the building where the CCTV caught me," Jim said.

Simon recognised Jim's technique: retaining control of the conversation by simply refusing to hear anything that was intended to distract him. He did that when interviewing suspects, too, and it was effective.

"I scouted her building over several days and found that the basement entrance was not secure. I waited until I was next on the roster so I would be called to the crime scene. That afternoon I broke into the building through the basement entrance. No one saw me. I used the emergency stairs to get up to her floor, and my shield persuaded her to let me into her apartment. Once inside I struck her with my gun and strangled her. Talk to Dan Wolf: he'll tell you he thought the murder weapon might be a gun. When she was dead I cleaned the apartment. I know what a forensics team looks for. I made sure I left no trace."

Morgan moved away from Simon's side. "But there *was* a trace. You missed your fingerprint." He walked into Jim's field of vision.

Jim turned his head to look up at the agent. "Yes, I'm just that stupid." His voice dripped sarcasm. "I checked every fibre of the carpet, cleaned every surface I touched, I even cleaned under her fingernails but I somehow missed something as blindingly obvious as a fingerprint in wet nail polish."

"So you're claiming you left it on purpose?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"You have everything else figured out, Agent Morgan. Why don't you tell me?"

Simon shook his head. The attitude wouldn't help...but that was familiar, too.

"I think you screwed up," Irwin said.

"No." Morgan reached for a chair, reversed it and straddled the chair, sitting down to face Ellison. It was an aggressive gesture. "Everything about this murder was very deliberate. You knew you were leaving that print." He looked hard at Ellison. "So, why? Maybe you *wanted* to be caught. But..." Morgan's eyes widened slightly. "No. You were making sure no one *else* would be

caught. That's why it's only a partial. Not enough to make a positive ID but enough to eliminate a suspect if we picked up the wrong man." He glanced at Simon.

Simon understood the unspoken question. He nodded slightly. Oddly, it did sound like something Jim might do. Not the murder, but, if Jim were to commit a crime, he *would* want to be sure no one could be wrongly convicted for something he did. That recognition was almost frightening; it meant he was thinking of Jim as guilty.

"That brings us back to why," Irwin said. "Why kill Tania?"

"I had reasons." Jim sighed. "Not good ones." He turned to look at Simon. "I'm here because...it was a mistake."

"A mistake?" That was just too much. Simon stepped forward. "A *mistake*?"

"A mistake," Jim repeated. "Simon, I know how it sounds."

Simon remembered their conversation that morning.

"Jim...is whoever killed Frazer responsible for the other murders?"

"I can't answer that. Not yet."

He was damned well going to answer it now! Simon moved past Agent Morgan and leaned across the desk. He looked right at Ellison. He saw Morgan gesture, telling him to stop, but he ignored it. He needed an answer. Now.

"Ellison, did you kill Frazer? And the others?"

Morgan shot him a look, telling Simon to shut up, but it was too late.

Jim shook his head, but it wasn't a denial. "I think it's time I called my lawyer, don't you, Simon?"

3:59pm

Simon looked at Rafe, wishing he had a better answer to offer. "Jim refused to answer any questions related to the other murders. All I can tell you right now is he hasn't denied it."

"But this is *Jim* we're talking about," Taggart shook his head. "There's got to be an explanation."

"I'm open to suggestions, Joel." Simon spread his hands. "You tell me. Why would *anyone* confess to first degree murder if he wasn't guilty?"

4:05pm

Simon tapped on the conference room door and walked in without waiting for a reply. For a moment, all eyes turned to him. Agent Hotchner gestured to an empty chair, letting Simon know he was welcome.

After a moment, Morgan resumed talking to the others. "That's about it. He asked for a lawyer and wouldn't say anything more."

There was silence as Simon claimed one of the empty seats at the table.

"He's a clever one," Rossi shook his head.

Hotchner nodded in grim agreement. "Now it's up to us to ensure this ploy doesn't work. JJ, I want you to talk with Irwin. Make her understand she has to let us lead on this. No more talking to him, with or without counsel present."

"There's nothing to make it federal yet," Morgan warned.

JJ rose to leave. "I'll tread carefully."

Simon didn't understand what they meant by *ploy*. "I'm not following," he said. "What's so clever?"

Hotchner answered him. "Before I joined the FBI I was a federal prosecutor. With what we have, I'd be doing everything in my power to make sure this never goes in front of a jury."

Morgan added, "When he retracts that confession, we'll be left with a shaky alibi and a fuzzy fingerprint. It's not enough. Ellison was the lead detective investigating the murder he just confessed to. That means everything he told us could have come from the investigation."

For an instant Simon felt relief and hope. "You're suggesting it's a false confession?" But why would Jim do that?

Hotchner said, "It's unlikely, but his defence can make the case. There are two possibilities. Three, but we'll dismiss the third. One – Ellison is guilty and it's a genuine confession. Two – he didn't kill Tania Roca but has some compelling reason to distract us from the rest of the investigation."

"Or, three?" Simon asked, wanting to hear it.

It was Rossi who answered him. "The third possibility is he's delusional. He genuinely believes he's guilty, but he isn't. We discounted that because Ellison shows no other signs of a delusional disorder."

"Not everyone who makes a false confession is delusional," Simon objected.

"No," Rossi agreed, "most commonly it's about notoriety or attention. Those people want credit for something they didn't do. They're egocentric and insecure. Ellison is neither of those things."

"We have to decide whether we believe his confession," Hotchner said. "Either way, he'll be facing charges."

If they believed Ellison, he was looking at murder one, Simon knew. If they didn't, at minimum it would be obstruction of justice.

"He's our guy, Hotch," Morgan insisted. "You should have heard him in there. He *wanted* us to know how smart he was. How he's going to get away with it. Ellison killed that girl."

"The question," Hotchner said, "is whether he killed the others. That's what we have to prove."

"Jim isn't just someone who works for me," Simon told them. "We've been friends for eight years. He's a friend to my son. I can't believe he's a serial killer."

Morgan rolled his eyes.

Rossi leaned forward. "The unsub we profiled is very good at concealing what he is. He's not psychotic. But there would be signs. Small things which, in hindsight, you'll recognise."

"Such as?"

"A violent temper. He may not lose it often. In fact, it's likely he has better self-control than most, because his survival depends on it. But when he *does* lose it, it's extreme. Even frightening."

Jim's voice echoed in Simon's memory. "*When we find the man who did this to her, Simon, you'd better not let me near him.*"

Morgan took up the recitation. "If Ellison's our unsub, he's a good cop. Closes a lot of cases. But he doesn't work well with a partner."

Jim didn't work *at all* with a partner. Every attempt to partner him up since Jack Prendergast had been an unmitigated disaster.

Rossi added, "He's not trigger-happy, but when he shoots, he always goes for the kill. And when he does kill in the line of duty, it bothers him less than it does other cops."

Well, yes, that was accurate. But Jim had a higher kill-count because he was a damned good shot, and it had never weighed on him the way it did most cops because Jim had seen a lot of combat during his tour with the army. He'd learned to compartmentalise.

Hotchner's voice became oddly gentle. "All of these things...if they ring true, you probably have explanations. These are not red flags and we're not saying you should have known what he is. They are pieces of a bigger picture."

Simon sighed. "What do you need from me?"

"You know Ellison better than any of us," Hotchner said. "We need to break him in interrogation _"

Simon shook his head. "You can't. Ellison knows all the angles and he's stubborn as hell. He'll clam up."

"Even if that's not in his best interests?"

"Jim did classified work in the army. He knows how to keep secrets. He's never confirmed it but I think he had training in resisting interrogation."

Hotchner turned to Rossi. "Dave, when his lawyer shows up, I want you to lead the interrogation. Be clumsy and push as hard as you can get away with." He held the other man's gaze for a long moment.

Rossi nodded, evidently understanding more than Simon did. "I'll keep him on the boil."

Hotchner turned back to Simon. "Does Ellison have a link to any of the other victims?"

"Depends what you mean by link," Simon said evasively. "All the victims have links to my team."

"Something more than that. If we weren't talking about serial murder, if you were coming at this fresh, is there any of these old cases where you'd say Ellison had motive or opportunity?"

Damn. Reluctantly, Simon nodded. "He had motive to kill Ryan Frazer. But he didn't know it. None of us knew until after Frazer was killed."

"I think you'd better tell me everything," Hotchner said.

6:28pm

Simon closed the office door and laid the Ryan Frazer case file down on his desk. He wanted to go through the file alone.

He skimmed through the initial reports, but that was simply to refresh his memory. It was an eight-year old case but Simon remembered it well enough. He extracted the crime scene photographs.

Frazer lived in a studio: just a main room and a bathroom. His body was found in the bathtub, but he didn't die there. The first photographs showed the main room of the apartment, blood spattered on the easy chair, floor and bed. They found traces of gunpowder on both the bedsheets and the easy chair. Bloody marks identified as footprints led to the bathroom.

The white-tiled bathroom was clean compared to the main room. There was a lot of pink-tinged water on the floor, but very little in the bath itself. More smudged footprints led to the tub. A smear of blood stood out starkly on the wall above the bath, and below it lay Frazer's body.

Simon focussed in on the details. The first thing was the bullet hole in Frazer's forehead – that was the one that killed him. A star-shaped wound from a .38 calibre gun, fired at close range and presumably with a silencer as no one in the building had heard shots. Below the bullet wound Frazer's eyes were open, staring. There was a ball-gag fastened around his face; it looked like something out of a bondage catalogue.

The body was fully clothed: a dark T-shirt that nonetheless showed the blood from the bullet wounds in his shoulder and stomach, corduroy pants and brown leather shoes. There were two further bullet wounds in his left leg, not visible in the pictures. Also not visible was the wallet the murderer left in Frazer's pants pocket, as if to emphasise that this wasn't a robbery.

What else? Ligature marks on Frazer's wrists suggested he had been bound at some point. Traces of blood were found in the sink, indicating the killer had at least washed his hands after dumping Frazer's body in the tub. No fingerprints were found. No hair or clothing fibres. No semen and no blood that wasn't the victim's. The bullets were analysed by ballistics but did not match any gun used in recent crimes. From the footprints they were able to approximate the height and shoe-size of the killer, but those details (height between 5'11 and 6'2, shoe size 9 or 10) could have matched half the men in Cascade.

Simon pulled out the autopsy summary. The usual preface described the victim as being in good health at the time of death. The cause of death was listed as a gunshot wound to the head. The coroner stated that this was the last wound inflicted and drew the tentative conclusion that the other four wounds indicated the victim had been tortured. Despite the sex-toy used as a gag there was no sign of sexual molestation or rape, but there *was* bruising to the genital area consistent with a kick in the balls, and abrasions on Frazer's knuckles and back suggested there had been a fight or struggle.

Simon sighed, pushing the file aside to grab a coffee from his percolator. It was a bit stale, but good enough. He reached for the last pages of the file. This was the part he wanted to re-read: the transcript of Jim's interview with IA.

When Frazer was killed, so soon after Detective Plummer's murder, a number of cops felt the cases could be linked. Two cops dead in a month, both of whom worked in forensics: Carolyn Plummer was a forensic detective; Frazer worked in the crime lab. No one even considered that

Frazer might be Carolyn's killer. But the amount of blood found at the scene prompted investigators to get a DNA workup. The DNA profile matched blood found at the scene when Carolyn was killed. Later, further evidence came to light implicating Frazer in her murder.

At that point, IA took over the investigation of both crimes. Jim Ellison was interviewed because as Carolyn's fiancé he had an obvious motive. Or, it would have been a valid motive if anyone had suspected Frazer prior to the DNA test.

Simon lifted the transcript from the case file and began to read.

Det. Ford: *Did you have any reason to suspect Ryan Frazer of the murder?*

Ellison: *Yes, I did.*

Det. Ford: *What reason?*

Ellison: *Frazer asked Carolyn out occasionally. After we announced our engagement she told me he asked her out more frequently. Carolyn refused him, of course, but he wouldn't quit. In my opinion his conduct amounted to sexual harassment and I urged her to report it.*

Det. Ford: *There's no such report on file.*

Ellison: *Carolyn didn't want to get a colleague into trouble. She thought she could handle the situation.*

Det. Ford: *Did you confront Ryan Frazer about this behaviour?*

Ellison: *I gave him the 'stay away from my girl' speech. It appeared to work.*

Det. Ford: *When was this?*

Ellison: *About two weeks before she died.*

Det. Ford: *Did you tell anyone else of your suspicions, Detective?*

Ellison: *Not directly. Frazer was a one of us. I know I couldn't accuse him without proof and there was none.*

Det. Ford: *So what did you do?*

Ellison: *I talked to Detectives Prior and Gregory, who were assigned Carolyn's case after I withdrew. I let them know Frazer might have had a motive, nothing more. Prior questioned Frazer and concluded he wasn't involved.*

Det. Ford: *Were you satisfied with Detective Prior's conclusion?*

Ellison: *I trusted his judgement.*

Det. Ford: And you had no idea Ryan Frazer was in fact guilty until you saw the DNA test result.

Ellison: If I had known, Ford, believe me, I wouldn't have let it go so easily.

Was Jim lying? It was certainly possible. Jim was first on the scene when Carolyn died, it was *possible* he had witnessed more than he admitted, and had seen the perp. Seen Frazer.

"When we find the man who did this to her, Simon, you'd better not let me near him. This would be worth going down for life."

Could Jim have been planning murder, even then?

"Simon, I wanted Frazer dead. I wanted him dead more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. Except her."

Simon put the papers away and closed the case file. He was looking for answers, but he didn't like the conclusions he was reaching. He didn't like that at all.

7:50pm

The cell door closed behind him with a clang. Automatically, Jim turned to face the door as the cop locked the cell. Their eyes met briefly before the cop walked away.

The cell was small and unpleasant. Three of the walls were bare brick; on the fourth wall the door took up the entire width. The door was metal with a barred window at head-level. It allowed him minimum privacy. Inside the cell there was a pathetic excuse for a bed: a metal frame with a thin mattress and a single blanket. A seatless toilet was the only other furniture: it stank of bleach and waste. There was nothing else. Not even enough room to pace.

Jim rolled up the blanket to use it as a pillow and lay down on the bed.

He was fucked.

The ceiling was made up of large, bare concrete blocks. Having nothing else to do, Jim studied them closely, learning every crack and imperfection. It was boring, but it passed the time and helped him to block out the sounds all around him. Jim did not expect to sleep at all.

"Let me guess: you're the bad cop," Jim said sarcastically as Agent Hotchner sat down opposite him. He was glad to see a different face, actually. Rossi was a blunt instrument. Jim's attorney tried to intervene a few times during the hours of interrogation, but eventually Jim told the lawyer not to bother. He wasn't going to say anything he shouldn't to this guy. Rossi's

technique in the interrogation room was the same one Jim used with teenage punks on their first arrest, but Jim was neither young nor naïve.

Hotchner glanced at the lawyer as he sat down and laid a slim document wallet on the table. "Can we offer you anything? Coffee, or a sandwich?"

So he was the good cop. Jim shrugged. "Thanks, but unless you're offering to send someone out for a hoagie, I'd rather go hungry." He knew that was an idiotic attitude. He was going to have to get used to prison food.

Hotchner glanced toward the one-way mirror.

Jim heard Simon's voice from behind the glass. "I know what Jim likes. I'll send someone."

There were two taps on the glass. Hotchner nodded, acknowledging the signal. "Anything to drink?"

"Water's fine," Jim answered and added a grudging, "Thank you."

Hotchner opened the document file, extracted a photograph and slid it across the table to Jim.

Jim needed only a glance. It was a picture he had memorised. "You're on the wrong track, agent."

"We know you didn't kill Carolyn Plummer," Hotchner said. "I think you loved her. You lost everything when you were abandoned in Peru. She became your everything. She was your chance for the kind of normal life other men get to have."

Jim stared straight ahead, his jaw clenched tight.

"When she died," Hotchner said gently, "it broke something in you."

That was enough. Jim met Hotchner's eyes. He couldn't match Hotchner's gentle tone, but he tried. "Is that how it was for you?" he asked.

"We're not talking about me."

"He made you listen." Jim pressed his advantage. "He made your little boy watch. That broke you, didn't it?"

Hotchner looked grim, but he was no longer looking at Jim. Jim fought to hide his smile. "After she - "

Jim cut in, determined to keep control of the conversation. "The way I heard it, you didn't just shoot him. That would have been a justified kill, especially with the child still at risk. But you beat him to death with your bare hands. It felt good, didn't it? Cutting loose like that?"

Hotchner drew the photograph back toward him. "You would know, wouldn't you?"

"Don't answer that, Jim," his lawyer warned.

But Jim was in control now. He leaned forward. "I would, but not from anything that's happened in Cascade. You know about Peru, so you know I did what I had to, to survive."

Hotchner drew in a breath, visibly regrouping. "Let's talk about Peru, then."

"I can't. That was a classified mission."

"I know. The BAU does psychological evaluations for the CIA. I spoke with a contact there, and he sent me this." Hotchner extracted a second photograph and showed it to Jim.

This one was a black and white print, a photograph of a badly decomposed body, its wrists bound.

Jim had never seen the picture before.

"Your work?" Hotchner asked. He looked at the lawyer. "He can't incriminate himself answering this question. This happened overseas."

It could have been his work, but Jim simply shrugged. "I already told you it was a classified mission. I don't recognise the picture, but if it's from Peru, I can't confirm or deny anything."

"What I find interesting is the knot," Hotchner said. He laid a third picture beside the second.

Jim forced out a laugh. "Congratulations, Agent. You just narrowed your suspect pool to every former boy scout in the continental US."

But Hotchner had regained control of the interview, and things went downhill from there. Jim admitted nothing, but the damned Feds had a lot more than he liked.

Consequences were something Jim didn't allow himself to think about eight years ago. Now he had no choice. He had to figure out what to do next. How much of the truth should he tell?

The rattle of a key in his cell door broke into Jim's thoughts. Jim stood as the door opened and Simon walked in. They had taken Jim's watch and his phone, so he had no way to guess how late it was. It felt like hours had passed, but in this cell, could he be sure?

The cop at the door wasn't the same one who was on duty when Jim first arrived here. If the shift had changed it must be very late. Jim's sense of time was screwed.

Simon nodded to the cop who closed the cell door and locked it. "Thanks," Simon said. "I'll call you when I'm done." He turned to face Jim.

Part of him wanted to tell Simon to fuck off. Another part of him recognised that impulse for the cowardice it was: he had nothing against Simon, he just wanted to avoid the inevitable

questions. Or, rather, the answers. Answers he knew Simon wouldn't like. But Jim owed him the truth.

"Jim."

"Simon." Jim sat down on the bed and waited.

"I went back to the file on Frazer. I found some things I'd forgotten."

"Like what?"

"You requested the DNA profile. It wasn't even your case, so there's only one reason you would have done that. You knew, didn't you?"

There didn't seem much point in lying any longer. "Yeah. I knew."

No surprise showed on Simon's face. "Well, I think that answers my next question."

Jim met Simon's eyes. He had some idea what this must be doing to his friend. Jim had already confessed to one murder. Anything he said now would surely not be admissible evidence but even so, admitting to more seemed a bad idea. He remained silent. If Simon asked him directly, he would answer.

Simon sat on the opposite end of the bed, facing Jim. "Jim, if you knew Frazer was guilty, why didn't you come to me? If you had evidence..."

"I had *nothing*. Just instinct."

"I would have helped you."

"No, you wouldn't. *Today* you would. Simon, think back for a moment. Eight years ago I was new to your team. You didn't know me, you didn't really trust me. If I'd come to you with wild suspicions about another cop, you'd have given me a week off and told me to see a therapist. I *tried* to find proof, Simon, I really did. I failed."

"If you told me you witnessed a crime, Jim..."

"But I didn't witness it. I can't explain it to you, Simon; I just *knew* it was him."

"Did you kill Ryan Frazer, Jim?"

October 2001

It was hard to believe he was actually doing this.

There were a hundred reasons to turn the car around and head home, but the only reason that mattered was going to be buried the next day. It would be a closed casket. Jim had done what he could to help her family through this, but this day was for him. A long drive. The first step toward a point of no return.

Jim drove out of state to buy a gun. He needed a gun that wouldn't be registered to him, one that couldn't be traced. There were plenty of gun dealers in Cascade where he might have obtained an unregistered or falsely registered firearm, but he couldn't risk being recognised as a cop. In another state, there was no such danger.

He was acutely aware that this meant he would be committing a federal crime if he went through with his half-formed plan. Which of course he wasn't going to do.

He convinced himself that the fantasy would be enough.

Jim drove back to Cascade with the gun safely concealed in his vehicle and several other things he had purchased stashed in the trunk. He reached home in the early hours of the morning and slept soundly for the first time since she died in his arms.

The following day he did all the things a grieving partner is supposed to do. He wore the black suit, accepted the sympathy and condolences, told a room full of people how much he loved the woman they were mourning. He managed not to look at Frazer, who was there with other friends from work. He nurtured the anger and hate because it was easier than crying for her.

That night he found himself outside Frazer's building. He stood in the shadows, looking up at Frazer's second floor window, imagining all of the things he would like to do to the murdering bastard. He did nothing, though.

At Cascade PD the investigation into her death appeared stonewalled. Jim tried talking to Gregory and Prior, even dropped hints about Frazer. Prior did pick up on Jim's hint and interviewed Frazer, but the son of a bitch must have been convincing. No one considered him a suspect. Jim knew that if they got Frazer to provide a DNA swab they would know he was guilty. But for that they needed probable cause...and they didn't have it.

On his next free night, Jim returned to Frazer's place. This time he went inside. He stood outside Frazer's door. There was a very familiar scent in the air. At first Jim didn't recognise it as Carolyn's perfume: he was so used to smelling it on her, and that was different somehow. Then he heard something and immediately recognised *that* sound.

From that moment, there was no turning back.

"What did you hear?"

Simon listened to Jim's story with a kind of sick fascination. The horrifying part was Jim's logic made a kind of sense. He was right about the dangers of accusing a cop, and Simon had to admit that had Jim come to him with the accusation, he might not have listened. Not under the circumstances. Not back in 2001 when Jim Ellison was a new detective, foisted on Simon because no one else wanted him.

Jim was silent and Simon repeated his question. "Jim, what did you hear?"

"I heard the fucker jerking off." Jim rubbed his face with both hands, leaning back against the cell wall. "He had something soaked in the perfume Carolyn always wore and he was jerking off."

Jim wasn't looking at Simon. His attention was inward; back in the past.

"You did kill him." Simon was sure now. The collar of his shirt felt too tight; he ran a finger along the inside to loosen it. He realised what he was doing and jerked his hand away.

Jim met his eyes. "You need me to say it out loud? Okay. I shot Frazer. But it wasn't murder. The son of a bitch had it coming."

If someone Simon loved was raped and left to bleed out in a filthy alley, how would he have felt? How did he feel? Carolyn Plummer wasn't a stranger to Simon, they had been friends. Good friends. Yes, the man who killed her deserved to die. That didn't give Jim the right to be the executioner.

"Maybe he did, but..." Simon shook his head. No, he just couldn't go there. There were always choices better than murder. "Jim, you didn't just kill him. The autopsy showed Frazer was tortured. The scene was..."

"I did what I had to," Jim interrupted harshly.

"Jesus." Simon swallowed. "I'm afraid to ask..." The words wouldn't come. Ryan Frazer. Tania Roca. How many others, Jim? Are there others? Can I believe you if you say no? It was safer for both of them if he didn't ask.

A cynical smile turned the corners of Jim's mouth. "I think two counts of murder is enough."

Simon held Jim's eyes, but couldn't say anything. Couldn't make sense of this at all.

Jim gazed up at the ceiling. "I don't know if our friendship is still worth anything, Simon. But if it is..." He shrugged, meeting Simon's eyes again. The hurt and anger drained away before Simon's eyes and Jim just looked tired. Bone tired. "I can't ask you to keep this to yourself, can I? You're too good a cop for that."

Simon looked away, ashamed of the relief he felt that Jim hadn't asked. Be a cop, he reminded himself. "You asked for the DNA test on Frazer because you knew it would prove he killed Carolyn."

"Yes."

"But he was already dead. The evidence made no difference. So...you were setting up a defence?"

"No. Maybe that was part of it, but all I really wanted was justice. I wanted everyone to know."

"What's the connection between Frazer and the Roca girl? Why did you kill her, Jim?"

Jim looked at Simon for a long time. "Tell me, is there any answer I could give that would make sense to you?"

Good question. "Probably not," Simon confessed. He stared at his friend, wanting to say so much more. There were no words for this.

"Then let it go, Captain."

Simon watched the cell door close. His heart was like lead in his chest. Jim had been about to ask him to choose between being a friend and being a cop. Then he stopped, refusing to make that request. Had he known?

Simon walked past the cells. At the end of the corridor, he collected his gun from the officer on duty and turned to walk out.

Hotchner was there, waiting. Surprise, surprise.

When Simon saw him he walked toward the agent. His eyes were full of sympathy. "I know that was hard to hear," he began.

Simon stopped him with a gesture. He reached under his shirt collar and pulled out the wire, handing it back to him. "I hope that was worth it," he told her.

"Captain Banks..."

"No. Don't. There's nothing to say. I'm going home."

10:30pm

The pool was covered, but Blair could smell the chlorine in the water. It was dark, the decking lit only by the lights in the house behind him, but it was easy to imagine this place on a summer noon...the family around the poolside...a big beach ball floating in the pool...Matt in swimming trunks, dripping wet...but Blair pushed away that pleasant thought.

"Are you okay, Blair?"

Blair turned and found Matt's arms around him. He returned the embrace, holding Matt close. "No, man, I'm not okay."

"You said it was possible a cop was involved in Tan's death."

"Yeah, but not...my god, Matt, he was investigating her case!"

"I remember," Matt was holding Blair tightly, nuzzling into the curve of Blair's neck. "Dad said they seemed very sure."

"I trusted him," Blair whispered.

"Come inside, baby."

Blair drew back a little so he could look into Matt's face. "Your family...I feel like I'm intruding."

"You're not, but I understand. Blair...if you feel that way, let's leave. I really want to be with you tonight." Blair moved closer and kissed Matt deeply. This wasn't easy for either of them; their reasons were different, that was all. Matt had lost his sister; he didn't see past that and there was no reason he should. Blair's feelings were more complex. He felt Matt turn on as their tongues met. The heat between them rose rapidly; Blair had an urge to drag Matt down to the ground and tear his clothes off. Matt's hips ground into his, encouraging his wayward thoughts. With a superhuman effort, Blair pulled back. He recognised the impulse for what it was: a need to forget the news and distract themselves.

"I think," Blair said regretfully, "your family needs you here."

Matt smiled sadly. "I love you."

Blair was still holding him. "I love you, too, man." He ran his fingers through Matt's thick hair. "I'm here for you. I promise."

Chapter 10

5 September 2009, 9:30pm

"You asked for the DNA test on Frazer because you knew it would prove he killed Carolyn."

"Yes."

"But he was already dead. The evidence made no difference. So...you were setting up a defence?"

"No. Maybe that was part of it, but all I really wanted was justice. I wanted everyone to know."

"What's the connection between Frazer and the Roca girl? Why did you kill her, Jim?"

"Tell me, is there any answer I could give that would make sense to you?"

Aaron Hotchner stopped the recording. It was borderline as admissible evidence: Ellison was speaking to a police officer and had been advised of his rights – that made it admissible. But he had lawyered-up hours before and his attorney wasn't present. Some judges would rule it out on that basis. But even if it was ruled inadmissible at trial, it was enough to get a warrant for anything they needed.

It was also enough to convince all of the BAU team that Ellison was the unsub they were looking for.

At this point in an investigation, the pressure was off. There was still work to do, evidence to find, but they had identified the unsub and he was in custody. It meant there was time. Hotchner had sent the team back to the hotel. He should have joined them, but he and Rossi stayed to oversee Banks' attempt to get Ellison to talk. Now only Hotchner remained in the room, sorting through the evidence they had already gathered.

If you stop hunting me, I'll stop hunting them.

Hi, Daddy! Is George a bad guy?

You're so strong, Haley, you're stronger than I ever was.

After I finish you I'm gonna find that bastard son of yours...

The conference room door clicked closed. Hotch looked up to see Rossi waiting for him.

"He's not a sociopath," Hotchner said.

"No, he's something else," Rossi agreed. "Arrogant, cold, self-righteous... He's a housecleaner but I think we caught him before he began to devolve."

“Going after the man who raped and murdered his fiancée doesn’t make him a housecleaner.”

“Are you defending him, Aaron?” Rossi pulled a chair from beneath the large table and sat.

“No, I – ”

“Killing one man doesn’t make him a housecleaner. What he did after that does. We haven’t proved it yet, but the only motive for killing the Roca girl that makes sense is she was getting close to the truth. After hearing that – ” Rossi indicated the laptop from which Hotchner had been playing the recording, “it’s clear how Ellison justified the next murder. And the next.”

Hotch said nothing. He remembered how good it felt when he beat Foyet bloody. Ellison had been right about that. Oh, later, when the adrenaline high crashed and rationality returned, he felt like shit, but in the moment... Every blow was for one of his victims...and for Hayley, and for Jack...and finally, before Morgan dragged him off the bloody, broken body, finally, just for himself. It felt damn good.

“It’s not the same, Aaron,” Rossi said softly.

“Is it so different?” Hotchner asked.

“Foyet stalked you for almost a year. He forced you to make impossible choices. Forced your family into hiding. Made you responsible for the people he killed. He killed Haley and would have killed Jack if he found him before you did. Aaron, everyone has a breaking point. You reached yours. And if Ellison had killed Frazer on the day his fiancée died, we might be able to say the same of him. But he waited more than two weeks. He planned the break-in and he tortured a man to death. Even if you empathise, there’s no defence for that.”

“I shot him and then beat him to death. That’s defensible?”

Rossi answered slowly. “I think so, yes. Foyet lured you there to kill you. Even if you went into that house planning to kill him, Aaron, it was because we all knew there was no other way he would stop. Arrest him? He escaped from one prison, why not another?”

Power and control, Hotchner thought. By forcing Aaron to kill him, Foyet had controlled him in the end. Don’t let him win.

“Let’s go, Aaron. You need some rest, and you can call Jack before bedtime.”

Hotchner nodded. Yes, he needed to hear his son’s voice tonight. He needed the reminder that he’d done the right thing. But he glanced at his watch and knew it wouldn’t be possible. It was past midnight for Jack.

He would set an alarm and call Jack before breakfast instead.

10:30pm

A busy police department is never entirely still, even at night.

Simon had survived some horrendous night shifts in the bullpen but this night seemed mercifully quiet. Simon saw Joel Taggart at his desk and muttered a hello in passing as he headed into his office.

Simon sat down at his desk and bent down to unlock the drawer. The Frazer file was on top of the other papers. He removed it and looked up as Joel tapped on his door.

"Simon, we need to talk." Joel's expression was very serious; Simon could see this was not good news.

"Can it wait, Joel?"

"It's about Jim."

Simon's heart sank. "What is it?"

Taggart looked at him uncertainly. "Uh...you said the Feds got a warrant to search Jim's property yesterday. Is that still valid?"

"I would think so," he answered. "Why?"

Joel took a seat. "Jim's truck was in the PD basement. I searched it. I found this." He laid a gun on the table, wrapped in an unsealed evidence bag. "And this." He put a second bag beside the gun. It contained a key stuck to a strip of duct tape.

Simon reached for the second bag, sliding it across his desk toward him. "Any idea what this opens?"

"I think it's for a long-term storage facility. There are four in Cascade that use this type. I don't think we can identify which one before morning, though."

"Joel, you sound like you think Jim's guilty," Simon objected.

"He confessed, Simon! How much more do you need?"

"Proof would be nice."

"I don't like it, Captain, but I'm a cop and I'm doing my job. That gun was in a concealed compartment inside the driver's door. No way that's standard issue. I'll bet you a month's salary the gun isn't registered to Ellison. And the key – that was taped to the steering column, right underneath. It wasn't meant to be found."

Simon looked at the gun on the table. "I thought Jim was your friend."

"Damn it, Simon, so did I!" Taggart pushed his chair back, half-standing. "If he murdered Tania, then he did it to cover something up. If Jim is capable of that..." He picked up the Frazer file from Simon's desk and opened it to show the photograph of Frazer's body. "If he's capable of this, then I don't know him at all. And neither do you."

There was nothing he could say to that. Simon had forgotten Taggart knew Tania Roca. It wasn't too surprising he was taking it personally now.

"Did he kill the others, too, Simon? Frazer is one thing, but what about Brent Kraemer? Did Jim burn him alive?"

"Do you believe he could have? Jim?"

Taggart spread his hands. "I just don't know any more."

Simon took a deep breath. "Frazer killed Carolyn Plummer a week before they were going to be married. It doesn't justify what Jim did, but we can both understand that as a motive. Tania Roca is harder to figure, but even if we assume Jim killed her as a cover up, it's possible it's Frazer's murder she was about to dig up, not the others."

Taggart frowned. "Okay. Maybe."

"According to the BAU profile, there are nine murders they are sure are the same killer. A serial killer. The ones they are less certain of are the two we now know Ellison killed. Joel, I see two realistic possibilities. One: Frazer and Roca were murdered by Ellison, the other nine by someone else. Two: Ellison is our serial killer. The BAU are convinced Ellison is their unsub, but what if they're wrong? Either way, Jim is guilty but what if we still have a serial killer out there?"

Simon watched Taggart think that one over. Finally he nodded, looking at Simon. "Do you have a plan of action?"

Simon indicated the gun on the table. "Get the gun logged in as evidence tonight and hand it over to forensics. Have them dust for prints at once and order a ballistic analysis for tomorrow." If it was the gun that killed Frazer, Simon would have to hand the case over to the feds. Jim had told him he bought that gun out of state. If it wasn't...well, that depended on whether it matched any other cases. Damn, now Simon was thinking of Jim as the serial killer.

"What about the key?"

"Log that in, too, but figuring out what it opens will wait. Are you willing to pull an all-nighter with me?"

"If it will help. What are we going to do?"

"Go through every case file we've got and find the truth."

6 September 2009, 12:54am

Jim turned over in the narrow bed, trying to find a comfortable position. A police cell wasn't designed to be comfortable.

Ryan Frazer deserved every moment of pain he had endured. Jim regretted none of it.

But he remembered the look on Simon's face and he did regret that. Simon was a good friend. He had been Jim's closest friend for years. Maybe Simon would have helped him eight years ago. Maybe Jim should have told him everything then. How different everything would be now if he could have punished Frazer some other way.

Jim had to assume Simon would tell IA and probably the Feds that Jim admitted to another murder. If they could find more evidence than his confession, Jim was in serious shit.

He was not an impulsive man. He planned things, thinking through all the angles before he acted. When he killed Ryan Frazer, he expected to be caught. He knew that, at the very least, he would be a suspect. Even as he tried to cover the evidence, he did not believe he would succeed.

October 2001

It was easy for Jim to find out Frazer's schedule. It was even easier, so soon after Carolyn's funeral, to get some time off. Captain Banks seemed almost relieved when he requested some time. Jim wasn't sure what to make of that.

Outside the building, Jim hesitated only for a moment. He felt the weight of the gun in his shoulder holster. He had no intention of using it. He didn't want to shoot Frazer: that would be too quick. Carolyn didn't die quickly. She died slowly, in agony, her lifeblood spilling out into Jim's hands.

The locked door of Frazer's apartment was no barrier. Once inside, he snapped on a pair of latex gloves and set about searching the apartment. It was an illegal search, he knew that. If he found anything, it wouldn't be easy to do anything about it. He needed enough evidence to get a legal warrant and repeat the search. That wasn't likely to happen.

Jim found a stack of videos. He had only recently transferred out of vice and he recognised some of the titles: not things an upstanding citizen should own. This collection alone was probable cause to arrest Frazer. But not for rape or murder.

In a box beneath the bed, Jim found a collection of toys that would have shocked him had he not already seen Frazer's movie collection. Leather handcuffs and collars, probes and clamps, gags and hoods. Jim never liked Frazer but this was a surprise. He'd figured the man for an

obsessive geek, not a dangerous sexual deviant. You think you know someone... Jim also found women's lingerie, red silk, drenched in Carolyn's favourite perfume. The lingerie wasn't hers, Jim was sure of that. But it told a clear story. He had hoped to find more: photographs, perhaps, or something of hers, anything that would prove Frazer's obsession with Carolyn. He was either smart enough to have burned everything or the goods were elsewhere. The lingerie was the only real evidence and that couldn't conclusively link him to Carolyn.

Through his disappointment, Jim realised that whatever he thought he had planned to do that night, he wanted to find evidence, even now. Something, anything, to get Frazer arrested.

It was then that Jim heard the key in the door. Shit! He darted into the bathroom, drawing his gun. He screwed the silencer into place quickly and held himself flat against the wall.

There was no turning back now, he realised as Frazer entered the apartment. Jim felt very calm. Every sound Frazer made was sharp and clear. Jim could almost see him as he moved about the room, oblivious to Jim's presence. Frazer stripped off his jacket and tie, throwing them across a chair. He lit a cigarette, turned the TV on and headed into the bathroom.

Jim stayed where he was, unmoving. Frazer walked straight past him. People were always complacent in their own homes, but Jim was almost shocked when Frazer gave no sign he noticed Jim. Frazer pissed into the toilet. Jim waited, watching. Frazer started to zip his pants and turned around.

Jim shot him. At the last moment he corrected his aim, going for a non-fatal wound instead of the heart-shot. Frazer stared at him in shock as he fell back against the toilet. Jim leapt toward him, covering Frazer's mouth with his free hand as Frazer drew breath to cry out. Still holding the gun, he hooked his arm around Frazer's neck, twisting his body so Frazer faced away from him. Holding him that way, Jim dragged his captive into the main room. Frazer struggled against Jim's hold. He bit down on Jim's hand covering his mouth. Automatically Jim reacted to the pain and Frazer wrenched away from him.

Frazer would be no match for Jim Ellison even on a good day. With a bullet in him he should have been an easy mark. Perhaps it was the adrenaline. When Frazer swung wildly at Jim, his fist connected. Jim blocked the punch an instant too late. Not that Frazer did much damage; Jim would have a black eye but it didn't faze him for a moment. He returned the blow, punching Frazer in the solar plexus and grabbing the front of his shirt as he doubled over, pulling the man up until they were face-to-face. He saw Frazer's eyes widen as if he'd only just recognised Jim. Jim threw him to the ground and followed up with a hard kick where it would hurt the most. Frazer curled up in agony, gasping for breath.

Jim looked down at the writhing body. It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

It wasn't the weight of Frazer's body that made it difficult to carry. It was the stink of blood and shit. He had been to fresh crime scenes many times and not had difficulty with the smells, but this time he was choking on it. Jim tried to breathe as shallowly as possible as he travelled the few necessary steps into the bathroom. He dumped the body in the bath and leaned over, steadying himself against the wall, relearning how to breathe. His gloved hand left a scarlet smear on the wall when he straightened.

Jim crossed to the sink and washed his hands, still wearing the latex gloves. There was a plastic shower-head attached to the bath tap; he turned the tap on and sprayed water liberally around the room, obscuring the foot and hand prints he had left. He left the water on trickle and walked to the doorway.

From the doorway he surveyed the room, trying to think like a cop again. What assumptions would he make, confronted with this scene? The ball-gag he'd used to shut Frazer up, the dishevelled clothing and still-open zipper suggested a sex-game gone badly wrong. Not all of the scene was consistent with that, but it was a good working theory. It might do.

Jim's cleanup in the main room was less thorough than it should have been, but he was gagging on the smells of blood and death. If he added the contents of his stomach to the evidence, he'd be caught for sure.

He managed to leave the building without anyone seeing him. His SUV was a couple of streets away, but it was dark and if anyone saw him, they didn't see the state of his clothing. He had a change of clothing in the SUV. His sweater and jeans were ruined; Jim bagged them up and would destroy them later. Finally, he sat in the driver's seat and gripped the wheel hard as the delayed shock reaction finally hit him. He was shaking so much it felt like there was an earthquake going on outside the vehicle. His breath was uneven, gasping. He held onto the steering wheel for dear life, as if it were the only anchor he had.

He had committed murder.

He, Jim Ellison, was a murderer.

The reaction began to fade and Jim leaned back in the seat. As he moved, he caught a glimpse of his face in the rear-view mirror. He turned the mirror for a closer look. A dark bruise was forming around his eye and Jim remembered Frazer hitting him. There was dried blood on his upper lip, too: a nosebleed, though he didn't remember that happening. If he was to survive the next few days, he needed a story that would explain the eye. He needed a story that no one would question.

12:55am

Jim shivered suddenly. His careful planning succeeded, perhaps too well. The night he killed Frazer, he went to a bar near the docks, one with a certain reputation. It wasn't long before some punk gave him an excuse to provoke a fight. He'd let it go on for a short while, took enough of a beating to explain his injuries, then played the cop and shut it down. It was exactly the alibi he needed: plenty of witnesses who would remember his face, remember his eye was blacked in the fight.

The weeks that followed were not easy. It was hard to pretend he knew nothing as his colleagues began looking into Frazer's murder. Because Frazer was a cop, they all pitched in a little on the case. Jim took the crime scene analysis: it allowed him to offer the suggestion that the bloody crime scene might contain the killer's blood among the gore. He ordered a full DNA workup on several samples.

His pretended shock and grief when the results showed what he knew all along must have been convincing. He had to answer questions, of course, but no one seemed to think he might be lying.

Jim got away with it, clean.

How coldly he planned that murder!

Remembering those days, Jim was no longer surprised by it, but at the time he had wondered about himself. He thought he'd left that part of him in Peru. The part that could plan a hunt with human prey as calmly as he shaved himself each morning. The part of himself that could kill without feeling. The part of himself that knew torture and pain –

– redblack stars behind his eyes – throat too raw to scream – his spine bowing in agony –

– from both sides, now.

It never truly left, did it?

6 September 2009

Jim Ellison was a fucking hero.

They'd all known that, of course, when he first joined Cascade PD. The army ranger who toughed it out in the jungle for a year and a half. Call it celebrity or notoriety, Ellison got his fifteen minutes of fame out of that. He even made the cover of Newsweek. So yeah, they knew he was a hero.

Joel worked with Ellison a couple of times before the Switchman case, but it was on that case that he and Joel became friends. Joel was still with the bomb squad then and Ellison spent a lot

of time with his team, analysing the Switchman's bombs. Ellison was the first to welcome Joel to Major Crimes when his transfer came through.

Ellison was a hero, in the old fashioned sense of the word. If the job called for it he'd leap onto a helicopter or run into a burning building. Joel had seen him do both. He knew the stories about what Ellison did when Simon and his son were kidnapped in Peru. He believed them all.

It hurt, more than Joel knew how to articulate, to think of Jim Ellison as a murderer.

But he had also seen the hate in Jim's eyes when he faced off with David Lash. He'd heard what he almost did to Dawson Quinn. He knew that one of the reasons Jim was such a good detective was his instinct for the hunt: Ellison never let go until he had a case solved. He had seen Jim struggle to contain his rage when a case got personal.

Joel knew Jim could have committed murder. He didn't want to believe that he had.

The key he found in Jim's truck was for a unit at the EZ Store storage company, a big converted warehouse in eastern Cascade. The owner was Phil Harley. When Joel gave him the serial code stamped on the key, Harley identified it as the key for a unit rented in the name of James Grant. Joel asked for a credit card number and was told Grant paid cash.

Harley was going to have to identify his customer as Ellison, or their search warrant was useless. Harley agreed to meet the FBI on-site. Rossi, Prentiss, Morgan and Reid drove to the warehouse: Simon and Joel from the PD accompanied them in another car. All the way there, Joel was hoping Harley would look at the photograph and declare he'd never seen Jim in his life.

He was disappointed.

Harley looked closely at the key before confirming it was definitely one of his. Simon showed him a photograph of Ellison and Harley nodded. "Yeah, that's Grant. He in some sort of trouble?"

Agent Morgan showed him their warrant. "We need to search the unit this man rented. Can you show us the way, please?"

"Sure. Sixteen. This way." Harley let them around to the unit. The door was large, a garage-style door built to accommodate a large van. Harley unlocked it for them. "You need me to stick around?"

"That's not necessary," Simon told him. "Thank you for your help."

Joel pulled the door open and, ducking inside, searched for a light switch. Yellow light flooded the unit and he looked around. It looked like a typical storage: the sort of junk you'd stuff in the attic if you had one. Old furniture, boxes neatly stacked and labelled, a couple of battered trunks. Partly used tins of paint. Nothing at all that seemed remarkable or suspicious. There

was a faint smell that could have been paraffin or paint thinner: perfectly normal. Had Jim not rented the unit using an alias, Joel would have thought they were wasting their time.

"Let's get to work," Agent Morgan suggested.

At first, they found nothing significant. A heavy crate turned out to hold tools: hammers, screwdrivers and drills, all well used and the kind of thing any practical man keeps around. Boxes held exactly what the labels claimed: old clothing, shoes. There was a surfboard and with it a box of rope. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Simon found the first piece of worrying evidence. At the bottom of a trunk containing old bedding he found a plastic box. It contained a glass vial two-thirds full of liquid and a syringe. He called Agent Prentiss over. "What do you make of this?"

She picked up the vial, turning it over in her gloved hand. "It's a medical vial, the type they use for prescription injectable drugs like insulin. The label has been removed but there's a manufacturer's serial number here..." She traced the base of the vial with her fingertip. "The contents could be anything."

"Some sort of poison?" Agent Ross suggested.

Prentiss looked at Simon. "None of the victims were killed with poison. Most prescription drugs are deadly in overdose...insulin, methadone...but I don't remember anything in the toxicology." She raised her voice. "Hey, Reid!"

Reid was moving paint tins. He stopped and straightened, looking their way.

"Do you remember if any of the victims had prescription drugs in their system?"

"Vallery was on antihistamines," Reid answered instantly.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Thanks." Prentiss dropped the vial into the evidence bag Simon held open. "Whatever is in here has been used. If it turns out to be poison, we could be looking at more victims."

Simon nodded grimly and bagged up the box and contents. Joel saw his face as he did it: Simon looked like Joel felt. They were both tired because they'd been awake all night reviewing every detail of the case files and the day was feeling more and more like a train wreck.

Joel made the next find. He was going through the contents of a wooden crate full of books and old magazines. He rapidly flicked through the pages of each one before setting them aside. But he reached the bottom of the box far too quickly. He looked more closely and discovered it had a false bottom. Joel's stomach did a backflip or two. He tipped the remaining contents out onto the floor, righted the box and felt around the edges of the base. He found a gap, got some

leverage and yanked the fake base up. It snapped in his hand, driving splinters into his flesh. He jerked his hand back, muttering an obscenity. Then he looked down into the box. "Oh, shit."

He was looking at a stash of weapons. A .38 with a silencer. A baton garrotte. A long stiletto and a hunting knife. A few things Joel couldn't name.

"Simon," he called.

Simon came to his side with Morgan close on his heels. Simon knelt beside the box and lifted out the knife. "Jim's special forces trained. This doesn't necessarily mean..."

"No," Joel agreed, but he knew Simon didn't really believe it.

"No," Agent Rossi called, "but I think this does. Morgan, take a look at this." Rossi had been working on the lock of an old wood chest. He had the lid open now but Joel couldn't see clearly what was inside. It looked like business stuff: papers in buff folders and large envelopes.

Morgan knelt beside the chest and reached inside. He pulled out a sheaf of papers, held together with a butterfly clip. He leafed through the papers and set them aside, picked up a folder and opened it. He looked up at Simon. "Copies of police reports that definitely shouldn't be outside the PD. A few newspaper clippings. But this...I think this is it. The smoking gun."

Simon crossed to Morgan's side and took the folder from his hands. He looked at the contents. Joel saw the truth hit him like a bullet.

Simon handed the folder back without a word and walked out of the warehouse.

"Captain!" Morgan started after him.

Joel stopped him by stepping into the agent's way. "Better give him a moment alone, Agent Morgan. Simon and Jim are close." He could use a moment himself. "What have you got?" he asked, mostly just to distract the others.

He opened the folder to show him. It was a sketched plan of what looked like a house and garden. There were some numbers written in one corner: 5 11 10-10. Joel didn't make the connection at first.

"Verne Jansen's property," Morgan prompted. "Is that Ellison's writing?"

Jansen. Of course. "Yeah, it is." Joel looked again and realised he'd misread it. S11, not five-eleven. Saturday the eleventh, ten minutes past ten. Which was damn near exactly the time Jansen died.

It was the evidence they had been looking for, but finding it made Joel no happier than Simon.

Some hero.

Chapter 11

23 December 2009 (Four months later)

It was by no means the first time Simon had visited the prison. Before he made captain, he had been out here two or three times a year, on work-related business. This was, however, the first time he came out here to visit a friend.

Simon submitted patiently to the routine search, but because he was a cop and wasn't going further than the visitation room they let him keep his gun. He followed the guard through the corridors, wondering what kind of reception he was going to get. Would Jim even agree to see him? Simon's testimony in court had not helped Jim's case. He had tried to soften it, but what could he do? The facts were the facts.

There were two other people in the visitors' room, as well as the inevitable guards. A woman in a bright yellow dress sat opposite a prisoner at least twice her age. Probably her father, Simon guessed. There were six booths with the glass-screen and telephone arrangement that was becoming standard in prisons. It enabled a visitor to talk with a prisoner in privacy (or at least the appearance of it) but eliminated any possibility of direct contact. Simon selected a booth as far from the others as possible and sat down.

He didn't wait long before the door opened on the prison side and Jim walked in. He seemed surprised to see Simon.

Jim did not look good. Dark circles under his eyes betrayed lack of sleep. There was a cut on his chin that was probably (hopefully) from shaving with a poor blade. More than that, there was something about the way he moved, even just crossing the room, that told Simon there was something wrong. Perhaps that was only to be expected.

Jim sat down and picked up the receiver on his side. Simon did the same.

"Hi." Jim's tone was perfectly neutral.

"How are you doing?" Simon asked. It was a lame beginning, but his concern was genuine. Whatever else Jim had done, he saved Simon's life more than once. Hell, he saved his son's life. Simon wasn't about to abandon his friend completely.

Jim shrugged. "Prison food sucks. Other than that I guess I'm okay. How is...everyone?"

Simon sighed. "Joel handed me his resignation."

Jim's eyes widened. "From the force?"

"That was his plan, yeah. IA offered him a promotion to join their team. He might accept it. Right now he's taking an extended leave."

Jim nodded, but didn't ask the obvious question: had Joel resigned because of him. Perhaps the answer was equally obvious.

"I hear the trial isn't going so well."

Jim hesitated, an odd smile fleeting across his lips. "Depends which side you're on."

"Do you have to ask?"

"That wasn't a question. I heard your testimony, Simon. You could have said a whole lot more."

Simon felt his tension ease. He should have known Jim would understand. "I told the truth," he said simply.

Jim nodded. "Yes, you did."

"Jim, I came because Maury Stirling called me." Stirling was Jim's attorney. "He asked me to testify on your behalf at your sentencing."

Jim's nod confirmed this wasn't news to him. He said nothing.

"It seemed...odd. Or at least premature. The trial isn't over yet."

"They're not going to acquit me, Simon. You know that."

Unfortunately Simon did. "You told Stirling I'd testify? What is it you expect me to say?"

"Only the truth." Jim rested his elbows on the shelf in front of him, leaning on the phone he held. "I'm not asking you to condone anything I've done, or to defend me. Maury wanted someone who can talk about my 'state of mind' when Carolyn was murdered. You're the only person who was there for all of it. Most of it," he amended.

Yeah, Simon could do that. He wasn't sure it would do much good, though. "Jim, if you're so sure you'll be convicted, why not change your plea? You'll get some credit for that. Better than hoping for a sympathetic jury."

"Because that bastard DA won't deal. Even if I plead guilty, Craven will ask for the death penalty. I think he sees an election coming or something."

"Shit," Simon swore with feeling.

Jim shrugged. "He's doing his job. Will you testify, Simon?"

"You know I will. But I have a condition."

Jim's expression became closed. "What condition?"

"A straight answer."

"Are you wearing a wire again?"

I guess I deserved that. "No, but someone could still be listening." This was a prison: the only person Jim was entitled to speak with privately was his lawyer. One of the reasons they used this telephone system for visitors was so they could monitor it if they wanted to. Simon pressed ahead anyway. "Jim, you're a cop. You know the position I'm in."

"You want to close the cases."

"I want to know if I can."

Jim shook his head. "If I answer that now, you could be subpoenaed again."

Yeah, it could happen, Jim, but they can only hang you once. "I don't think it would make things worse for you at this stage. Jim," Simon began reasonably. He saw Jim start to shake his head and he lost his temper. "I've had enough of your evasive answers, Ellison! I need to do my job and you know that." More softly, Simon added, "Jim, I've seen and heard the worst already. I'll do what I can to help you whatever your answer but I need to hear the truth from you, now."

Jim's blue eyes met his, appraising. "You haven't come close to the worst." He sighed heavily. "I can't explain it to you, Simon. Everything seemed so clear eight years ago. I thought I was..." He stopped, shook his head. "The truth. Your BAU friends think I killed eleven people."

Simon ignored the barb. "Are they right?" He instinctively held his breath, waiting for Jim's answer, praying he could believe it.

"No," Jim said. He paused before adding, "It was more than that."

Simon let out his breath. He struggled to keep his expression neutral.

"Don't ask me any more, Simon. Not now."

Simon wanted to argue. He wanted to demand answers and explanations. He understood Jim's position, though. Whatever else he might be, Jim wasn't suicidal. So all he said was, "I'll be back, then. After the trial."

"I know you will."

They had an understanding. It was the best Simon could hope for. "Is there..." the words sounded so trite "...anything you need, anything I can do?"

Jim's smile seemed genuine. "You agreed to testify. I can't ask for more."

The media circus surrounding James Ellison's trial was a nightmare for Tania's family. It wasn't enough that she was dead. When the news broke, it seemed to Blair that every reporter in the state wanted a front-row seat in the theatre of her family's grief and pain.

There's something about the phrase "serial killer" that makes journalists react like Pavlov's dogs.

Matt's phone rang off the hook. He bought an answering machine for the apartment and changed his cellphone number. It helped, but it didn't prevent the more persistent sharks from calling him at work or even stopping him in the streets.

It was a big test of their fledgling relationship. Blair did what he could to support Matt. He massaged the tension out of his shoulders and tried to keep them both laughing. He held Matt close while they watched the news reports of the trial. At night, their lovemaking became a little desperate, both of them using it to block out the day.

Blair, believing Matt's need was far greater than his own, refused to burden him further, but he was feeling the strain himself. Matt offered to go with him the day Blair had to testify. Blair initially accepted the offer but when he saw how much it was costing Matt he told him to go home. Blair had to fight off a few reporters himself that day. But he'd anticipated that, and solved the problem by giving an exclusive interview to one of Tania's colleagues at the Tribune. She was Tania's friend, would report with some sensitivity, and it allowed him to give a firm no comment to everyone else. Let them assume he'd been paid for the story. He didn't care as long as the Rocas knew the truth.

Tony Roca was in court almost every day of the trial. Lien was not.

On the day Ellison's trial ended, most of the Roca family attended the court to hear the verdict. Blair was with them; over the long weeks of the trial Lien seemed to have adopted him as another son, or maybe she was just that motherly with everyone. Either way, Blair was now part of the family. Had he and Matt been a heterosexual couple, he was sure she would be dropping hints about grandchildren by now.

He rather liked it.

Blair watched Ellison as the verdict was read out to the court. Ellison didn't look at the judge or the jury. He stared straight ahead, no emotion showing on his face. Three counts of murder in the first degree. Guilty. Guilty. And guilty. You'd have thought Ellison was a waxwork model for all the reaction he showed.

Across the courtroom, Blair recognised Captain Banks. He seemed unhappy with the verdict. It couldn't be easy for him: Blair knew he and Ellison were colleagues. Did he think it was the wrong verdict?

Blair's feelings were confused. Ellison murdered Tania. He should be happy her killer had been brought to justice, but he wasn't happy. Maybe because it was Ellison. An opportunity lost.

That evening, Blair begged off the family gathering and went alone to his office at Rainier. He locked the door, sat down at his desk and tried to work, reviewing the final chapter of his thesis.

...vision cannot be considered a conventional research method. Nevertheless, the core of the Chopec shaman's message deserves close scrutiny. While I have long held the belief that a sentinel's heightened sensory awareness must be a genetic trait, it is clear that the shaman (and by extension, his tribe) require more. In addition to heightened senses, specific personality traits must be present before they bestow the title of sentinel.

To the Chopec, a sentinel possesses the characteristics of protector and predator. The protector displays a fierce loyalty to the tribal group, an ability to identify a threat swiftly and deal with it decisively. The predator is a hunter and a warrior; one who kills but not indiscriminately.

The jaguar spirit so frequently associated with sentinels in South American cultures embodies both characteristics. It is worth noting that in tribal legends the jaguar most often appears as a defender or as a bringer of just retribution.

Was James Ellison a sentinel? If he was, what did that mean? Blair knew from his self-administered crash course in serial killers that Ellison did not fit the standard profile. Was it possible this was all connected somehow?

It didn't matter any more.

Blair opened his sentinel file and found the notes he had written after his encounter with Ellison in Memorial Park. He looked at them for a moment: two sheets of paper filled with his hurried writing. He tore the paper into small pieces and threw the pieces in the trash.

Then he smiled as he felt Matt's arms around him.

"Are you ready, babe?" Matt asked.

Blair looked up at him. "My first ever family Christmas. Of course I'm ready." He linked hands with his boyfriend and left the desk.

As they went through the door, Blair did glance back, just once, at the trash bin.

It was over. He would never know.

The End
