

As It Was Meant To Be

William Ellison has always been ruthless in controlling every aspect of his life and his sons' lives... until the day he takes on Blair Sandburg, and discovers he's bitten off more than he can chew.

Taking The Trip

Blair awakens from a dream...



*As
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by Bluewolf
Art by Bonanza

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illustrated by Bonanza

"Can I stay with you, man? Just a week. That's all. Just one week, to give me time to find a new apartment, then I'll be out of your hair." Finding a new apartment, after his old one had been destroyed by a fire earlier that morning, wouldn't be easy at this point in the academic year, but Blair was confident that he could find someplace inside that time, even if finding a place overnight was unrealistic. What he could get might not be in the best part of Cascade, but he had lived in some pretty crappy places in the past, and he could carry on looking for somewhere better at his leisure, even if he had to remain in a poor apartment in a bad area till the end of the semester.

Jim shook his head. "Sorry, Sandburg. That's not an option. I can't let you stay with me."

Blair Sandburg looked at the man he had known for just over a month but had already come to consider a friend. There was something about the tone of his voice...

"Can't or won't?" he asked quietly.

"Huh? They're the same thing."

"No, they're not. Won't means 'will not. No reason, I just don't want you there'. Can't is more subtle. It means 'well, I wouldn't necessarily mind, not for a week, but...' There are plenty of buts. No spare room or bed, no suitable couch, my landlord doesn't let me have visitors staying, my budgie would have a nervous breakdown if there was a stranger in the house overnight..."

Jim looked at him for a moment. "It's can't, Chief. For your own good. Staying with me would not be a good idea, believe me."

"Can you tell me why not? Like, I can accept that you think it's not a good idea, but it can hardly be worse than sleeping on the floor in my office."

"It's... " Jim took a deep breath. "I'm gay, Sandburg."

"So? That doesn't automatically make you a rapist, out to make every straight man you meet your prey. Gays are just as ready as straight men to take no for an answer – probably even more ready," he added, thinking of some men he knew who regarded a woman's 'no' as encouragement.

"My father found out about me. Years ago. He believes it's a choice I made, and that I can be persuaded – or bullied – into changing my mind. So any man he thinks I might be interested in – he threatens to destroy. If I ignore his warning, he does destroy them.

"I don't have any friends. Acquaintances at work, yes. But no friends.

"When I was in the army – he wasn't happy about it, but the military attitude towards homosexuality at that time was so discriminatory that he just had to accept that while I was in the army, I was safe from myself. Safe from being approached.

"When I was in Vice I was a complete loner, working alone most of the time. Then when I transferred to Major Crime and Simon partnered me with Jack Pendergrast... I made the mistake of getting too friendly with him. And he was so straight he'd have made a ruler look like a corkscrew. My father wouldn't believe it was just having a drink together or going to watch a game when we went anywhere together outside work hours. Jack disappeared. I've no proof, of course – but I'm convinced my father had something to do with it.

"Even you riding along with me as an observer is dangerous for you – but if I never see you outside work, I stand a chance of convincing him that having a male 'partner' wasn't my choice. In any case, all the detectives in Major Crime are men; anyone I'm partnered with will be male... though I doubt he'd accept the logic in that."

Blair frowned. "But you were married?"

"Yes." There was no humor in Jim's smile. "He blackmailed me into it. Marry or else... You don't need to know what the 'or else' was. After six months he asked why there wasn't a baby on the way, because he wanted a grandson. So I told him – he'd only specified marriage. He hadn't insisted I sleep with my wife – and that anyway, I couldn't get it up for her because he – *he* – had brainwashed me into completely distrusting women when I was a boy, after Mom left. 'Never trust them, Jimmy', he said, over and over and over. 'They're only out for what they can get from you. Unreliable, every one'. So I couldn't trust Carolyn enough to be vulnerable with her – and when are you more vulnerable than when you're in bed with someone? It was true – but what I didn't add was that I'm completely gay, Sandburg. Women don't appeal to me at all. I don't know if he made me that way with his misogyny. It's possible, I suppose."

"And then after a while she left you?"

"Yes. She stuck it out for nearly a year, then got the marriage annulled on the grounds of my failure to consummate it. Of course, that made my father even more determined that I wouldn't slip back into my 'evil' ways. Evil ways?" He made a sound that was half a laugh, half a sob. "He caught me kissing my first – my only – love. We'd never done more than that, we'd never had the chance. I've never had sex, Sandburg – God, why am I telling you all this shit?"

"Let me get this straight. Your father won't even let you have male *friends* because he thinks you're going to seduce them?"

"Or be seduced by them. He thinks because I'm gay any man I get friendly with will also be gay, or else out to use me to get his rocks off."

"That's insane."

"And he wants to 'cure' me. I suppose I have to be grateful he didn't shove me into a home for mental deviants – I've heard that's sometimes done."

"How does he know you're getting friendly with anyone?"

Jim shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't actually spoken to him in twenty years – all our communication has been by letter. But if I let you stay with me, in less than that week you specified I'd get a letter from him – 'If you ever see that man again, I will see to it that his university funding is terminated – permanently – wherever in the world he tries to go'. He could do it, too. I don't know how he manages it, but once he decides to do something, he gets it done. The only time he ever failed was expecting me to father a grandson for him."

"Doesn't it occur to him that straight men can have good friends of their own sex?"

"I don't think so. He certainly doesn't. He has business acquaintances that he calls 'friends' but he never sees them outside of business, apart from two or three he sometimes plays golf with – and even then it's more of a business outing than a social one. As far as he is concerned, the only people you see in a social context are other family members."

"Sounds like someone screwed pretty badly with *his* mind at some point," Blair muttered.

"Well, from the little I remember of my grandparents, who died in an accident when I was seven, they were Bible-thumping bigots – anything that gave fun or pleasure was sinful. I only saw them once a week, and hated those 'duty' visits. Dad grew up with them." He shook his head. "Anyway, I'm sorry, Sandburg, but you'll have to find a room somewhere else. I don't want to be responsible for you losing your career – especially for no reason."

"He wouldn't believe I was acting as a therapist for you? I mean, like, helping you with your senses is a sort of therapy..."

"He wouldn't believe it, because he has always refused to believe that I had senses that were in any way different. If I tried to prove it he punished me for lying."

"Bastard!"

"No way, with parents like his." Blair grinned briefly, but with little amusement, at Jim's attempt to joke. The older man sighed. "In a way, I'd have liked to have stayed in Peru. I'd a home with the Chopek. It was lonely there too, but it was a different kind of loneliness – I *was* different from the tribe. But once the army found me, what could I do?"

"Nothing but come home," Blair agreed.

He spent the night in his office at Rainier, sleeping restlessly, wondering about Jim. He deeply pitied the man, denied even the friendship of his own sex, forced into marriage with someone for whom he could feel nothing... and now utterly lonely.

Blair had been studying the police for some months, moving from department to department, because he was writing about the police as protectors of their community – an adaptation of his interest in sentinels, the ultimate protectors of their communities. When he moved into Major Crime and found himself riding with Jim, he had almost immediately realized that Jim was a sentinel, and for a few minutes had toyed with the idea of changing subjects and writing about Jim as a sentinel. However, he had very quickly recognized that it was not a good idea, that there was no real way he could hide Jim's identity, so had remained with his original theme. But he had explained to Jim what he was, and had tried to help him learn control over his often erratic senses.

Well, he would continue do what he could during what might be called working hours. As well as teaching Jim to control his senses, he would give the man as much friendship as he could.

It turned out not to be as simple as that. When he joined Jim in the bullpen next day, the detective thrust a letter into his hands. "This arrived this morning."

"James. It has come to my attention that you are working with a man who shows all the signs of being homosexual. You will tell your superior that you will no longer work with him, or I will see to it that the man's student funding is terminated and his university place is closed to him.

"You will have nothing more to do with a long-haired, effeminate queer. Wm. Ellison."

Blair looked helplessly from the letter to Jim.

"What can I say, man?"

"There's nothing you can say. Nothing you can do." He took the letter back from the smaller man. "I'll have to let Simon see this, to explain why... "

"You're just going to give in?"

"Sandburg, I told you. If I don't, you're the one who will suffer. You'll lose your university place, and he'll see to it that you never get another, anywhere. I wouldn't put it past him to make sure you couldn't get work anywhere, either – not even sweeping the streets. To punish you for daring to be friendly with me, tempting me... "

"Tempting you? Does he think the entire male world is bent?" But yes, Jim had implied as much the previous day.

"If they're not married, if they have long hair... hell, if they not working with their muscles, even though he doesn't... yes."

"It doesn't occur to him that it would be highly irresponsible for a student to marry?"

"It occurs to him that anyone older than eighteen should be holding down some sort of full-time job, not still studying. Should be supporting a wife, even though he never remarried after he divorced Mom. Should be a 'useful member of society'. He doesn't see academics as being useful members of society." He swung around and walked over to Simon's door. There was a defeated slump to his shoulders.

When Jim left Simon's office, the police Captain followed him to the door and beckoned Blair in. Once the door was closed on them, he said, "Jim said he told you the problem."

"Yes." Blair sighed. "How stupid can that bastard be? Does he really want to destroy Jim?"

"He sees it as saving Jim from himself."

"As if Jim was still five years old," Blair muttered bitterly. "Dammit, Simon, my upbringing wasn't exactly the most stable, but I'll swear my mother was a model parent compared to his father!"

Simon nodded. "He's told me a little. If anyone turned Jim against women, it seems to have been his father... after his mother walked out."

"Yeah, he knows that – and from something he said to me yesterday, the rot goes back at least another generation. His father was brought up by bigots. He doesn't know how his grandparents were brought up, of course... but *their* parents could have been narrow-minded bastards too. Could go back half a dozen generations. But he's the one who's suffering; the one who, at heart, is resisting – rebelling against the bigotry. I doubt he's even really gay, you know." He grinned mirthlessly. "His father's comment about me – I'm, like, used to that kind of assumption. I'm on the small side of average height, I have long hair... So I'm sort of used to being approached. I know what even seriously closeted gays are like, and I'd say Jim isn't one. He may be bi, but then most of us are to some degree. He did tell me his father had caught him kissing another fella, but what he didn't say was how old he was at the time... but I reckon he was pretty young, probably around the age when a lot of guys do experiment, and he said it hadn't got past kissing.

"His father won't accept he has heightened senses, either. And now he's acting to keep Jim from getting the help he so desperately needs."

"You think Jim will knuckle under?"

"I'm sure of it. He told me yesterday that his father can and has destroyed people he was friendly with. I'm not sure myself how anyone can have that sort of power, but Jim clearly thinks

he does, and he's not prepared to risk my career. Hell, / don't want to lose my career, though I don't think William Ellison would find it as easy as he thinks to destroy it... but I don't want to see Jim destroyed, either. And if he doesn't continue to get the sort of help I can give him, he's going to zone out completely – just switch off, switch the world out – and sooner, rather than later."

"I could go and see his father, try to make him see sense."

"Wouldn't work, man. I get the impression that his father would rather see him lying catatonic in a mental institution than a) admit there's anything unusual about his senses, and b) allow him to hob-nob with the long-haired, therefore obviously queer, academic – who by definition are all sissies anyway. No – more than that. Allow him to work closely with *any* man. Jim thinks he had something to do with the disappearance of a man called... Pendergrast?"

Simon nodded. "Yes. They were partners for about six months. Jack Pendergrast disappeared under very mysterious circumstances a couple of years ago. He was supposed to be delivering the ransom for a kidnap victim – but nobody saw him or the victim again. IA decided that he'd run off with the money. Jim refused to accept that. Now I'm wondering... how much of that was faith in Jack, how much was fear of what his father might have done?"

"He despises women, he taught Jim not to trust women, yet the only person he would willingly allow Jim to be friendly with would be a woman," Blair finished. "Crazy, isn't it."

As Blair turned to leave, Simon said, "Sandburg, I didn't realize, yesterday, the position you're in. You can come and stay with me."

Blair swung back. "You mean that? Thank you. It shouldn't take me more than a week to find somewhere."

"However long it takes," Simon said. "Don't think I don't know how hard it is to find somewhere reasonable mid-term in a university town. You're not ending up in some rat-infested building that should have been demolished five years ago just to have an apartment so that you won't 'bother' me for more than a few days. You tell me you've got a place, I'll check it out. Got it?"

"I've lived in rat-infested buildings before," Blair said.

"Well, you're not doing it again. Not on my watch," Simon told him.

Blair looked at him. "Okay," he said. "And... I really do thank you."

Jim spent the rest of the day on paperwork and rather pointedly ignoring Blair, who shook his head and took the chance to have a word with Rafe and Brown regarding their current case, giving Jim his space.

After they left the bullpen that evening, Simon followed Blair to Rainier where he retrieved the few things he had been able to save from his burning building – his apartment had actually been two stories below the one where the fire originated, although it had spread very quickly. When the alarm was raised he had risked delaying a few minutes to push some clothes into a duffle bag, and the few books he had in the apartment in with the laptop that was already in his backpack, before he grabbed his sleeping bag off his bed, bundled it under his arm, and headed for safety. The roof of the building had collapsed just two or three minutes after he got out, confirming what he had suspected during the two months he had lived there; although it was in a reasonable part of the town and looked to be in good enough condition, the building had been a major fire waiting to happen. Because of that he had kept his anthropology artifacts and books, as well as his most valued and irreplaceable possessions, in his 'office' at Rainier and, looking at the pile of burning rubble, he had breathed a silent sigh of relief over that. The only reason the laptop was there was for work he had done the previous evening; the external backup drive and his small printer were safe at Rainier. He had really lost nothing that was of value to him.

Blair replaced the things he had taken out of his backpack the previous night, and picked up the two bags and his sleeping bag. Simon firmly took the duffle bag, thus sharing the carrying, although he could tell that neither pack was heavy. They put the bags in the back of Blair's Volvo, then Blair followed Simon home.

Simon had left a stew simmering in a crock pot; all he had to do was boil some potatoes he had peeled that morning and left in water, and inside half an hour dinner was ready. They ate hungrily, exchanging a few desultory comments as they did.

Once their plates were empty, Simon said, "I don't usually have dessert, but I do have some fruit if you – ?"

Blair grinned. "After that plateful of stew? I couldn't swallow another bite!" he said. "That was really good, Simon."

"Thanks," Simon said. "If I'm honest, though, it's my one never-fail recipe. Anything else tends to be hit or miss."

There was some of the stew left, and Blair said, "What do you want to do with it?"

Simon reached up to a shelf and took down a plastic container. "Freeze it for later," he said. "Normally I cook enough for at least four meals and freeze anything that's left in single portions, so there's enough here for two – we can have it later in the week."

"I'm already looking forward to it," Blair said.

He washed and dried the dishes, leaving Simon to put them away, but he carefully noted where everything went. Then they returned to the living room and settled down in front of the television. "Anything particular you want to watch?" Simon asked.

Blair shook his head. "Pretty well anything would be a novelty," he said. "We rarely had access to TV when I was growing up, and since I went to Rainier at sixteen – between studying, then writing out lesson plans and grading tests, and now working on my dissertation as well, I've never had the time. But I'm going to take a couple of evenings off and just relax. I think I deserve it after everything that's happened in the last forty-eight hours."

They had an amicable disagreement over bedding; when Simon went to look for sheets and a comforter, Blair insisted that his sleeping bag would do him perfectly well, it was what he'd been using anyway, and there was no point in dirtying Simon's sheets.

"And if you had someone staying with you, what would you do about bedding?" Simon asked.

"If I had it, I'd provide it," Blair admitted.

"I rest my case." And Blair gave in, helping Simon to make up the spare bed.

His sleeping bag was comfortable and warm enough, but as he settled into the unaccustomed – well, luxury, of sheets and comforter, Blair wondered how he could possibly repay Simon for his generosity.

And then his mind moved on to the day's bigger problem – Jim. Or, rather, Jim's father.

What motivated the man? Had his own life been so miserable that he wanted to know he was not alone in that misery? How could he have found out what Jim was doing, who he was working with? And how could he possibly have the power, the world-wide influence that Jim was sure he had?

No – he might be able to destroy Blair's position at Rainier, though for various reasons Blair thought it highly unlikely; he might make it extremely difficult for Blair to get into any other university by somehow ensuring that Rainier didn't give him any sort of reference, but if Blair left Cascade, left America, could his influence possibly stretch to another country? Surely only as far as trying to make sure Rainier didn't give him any recommendations.

And if Blair moved away from Cascade and changed his name? Unless he had someone like a private detective following Blair... Hmmm. That was a possibility, but there were many ways to lose a tail.

Blair smiled to himself. William Ellison had absolutely no idea who his current adversary was, what he was capable of. Had the man even tried to check on Blair's history? It seemed very unlikely, and in any case, Blair's obvious history was far from complete. Face value could make a very good disguise...

He fell asleep still debating his best course of reaction.

He was up first in the morning. He wasn't sure what Simon usually had for breakfast, but coffee was a pretty sure bet; he could at least get that started while Simon was in the bathroom.

When Simon joined him, he said apologetically, "Wasn't sure what you wanted for breakfast?"

"I usually just have toast," Simon said.

"They do say breakfast is the most important meal of the day," Blair said. "Nutritionists say you should breakfast like a king, lunch like a lord, and dine like a pauper for a healthy diet."

Simon shook his head. "Doesn't matter how little I eat at night," he said as he put two slices of bread into the toaster. "I'm never hungry first thing."

Blair grinned. "I hear that. And, you know, I actually agree with you. I haven't had a chance to restock, but before my apartment was destroyed, as often as not I only had an alga shake for breakfast. I buy the dried alga and mix it with milk. Okay, it's nutritionally pretty good, but it isn't exactly what a king would have."

"Not practicing what you preach, then?"

"Oh, healthy eating – not too much red meat, nothing too greasy, watch your sugar and salt intake – makes sense, but I think the nutritionists sometimes take it too far," Blair admitted.

Simon chuckled as he took the toast out of the toaster and put in another two slices of bread. "So what are you wanting for breakfast today, yourself, if you don't have your alga shake?"

"A couple of slices of toast will do me fine."

As they ate, Blair told Simon that he would need to spend the day at Rainier. It was something he'd done more than once in the time he'd spent at the PD as an observer, so Simon saw no need to query it. He simply gave Blair a key, told him to make himself totally at home if he got back first, and then headed off for the PD.

He was running just a minute or two late, but with luck he wouldn't be held up on the road...

Blair checked the time – he didn't have to be at Rainier for another hour, so he quietly took the memory stick he used for his really private business from a hidden pocket in his pack and plugged it into his laptop. Using it as an external drive, he called up his first contact...

Quarter of an hour later, he opened up a new file on the memory stick. He copied some info into it, typed in several comments, read them, corrected a typo, saved the file, then ejected the memory stick. He slipped it back into its pocket and closed down the laptop. He thought for a minute, then took it into his bedroom; he wouldn't actually need it for what he had to do that

day. Then he put on his jacket, picked up his backpack and left the apartment, making sure that the door was locked before he headed for his car.

At Rainier he made his way to his office; the man he wanted to see probably wouldn't arrive for at least another ten minutes, and Blair wanted to give him time to get in and settled at his desk.

Whoever was working with or for William Ellison didn't stand a chance... not against Jack Kelso. The man might be confined to a wheelchair as the result of an injury, a legacy from Desert Storm, but his mind was more than alert. Blair grinned to himself. Jack was another case of face value hiding what the man was able to do...

At 9:15, Blair collected the notes and an artifact he would need for his 10am lecture, put them into his backpack, left his 'office' – part of a storage cupboard – and walked briskly towards Kelso's far more luxurious office. Blair, after all, was a mere TA; Kelso was a tenured professor.

He knocked and went in when Jack called, "Enter!"

"Hi, Jack."

"Blair! Have a seat. So what brings you here? It's not just for the pleasure of my company – you're too busy these days just to make social calls... though once you've finished your dissertation..."

"I'll probably be even busier, though not in the same way."

"You certain don't gather any moss, that's for sure... So what can I do for you?"

"Can you tell me anything about William Ellison?"

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Very influential. Likes his own way. Ruthless when it comes to getting it. He'd be a typical white supremacist if he was a little less subtle in his methods. As it is, he's an atypical white supremacist."

"Blacks and Asians should be kept in their place, women belong in the bedroom or the kitchen, gays are a total abomination, Christianity is the only religion God supports..."

"People who are born disabled – it's totally the fault of sins their parents have committed. People like me, disabled because of a war injury... not quite the same thing, but obviously God didn't take us when we were injured because we weren't good enough for Heaven."

"Jim said his grandparents were Bible-thumping bigots. So I suppose it isn't totally his fault," Blair said.

"Jim? Of course – the older son became a cop."

"He's a nice guy, but totally ruled by what he thinks his father can – or might – do."

"At least he has a life of his own making. The younger son... absolutely brainwashed into agreeing with everything his father says. Totally unable to formulate an opinion of his own."

"Or he's mentally rebelling but too cautious to say anything to indicate he does have a mind of his own?"

"It's possible, I suppose... And I hope you're right, otherwise when his father dies he won't have the remotest idea how to manage. So what's your interest in William Ellison?"

"Jim," Blair said.

"Of course," Jack agreed. "You see Jim as the ill-treated pup you want to rescue, but you're not sure of the best way to go about it?"

"Well... not quite, though that comes into it too. William is actually threatening me."

Jack smiled broadly. "He doesn't know who he's taking on, does he."

"He's told Jim that if he doesn't refuse to work with 'the long-haired queer' he'll get that same queer kicked out of Rainier and denied a place in any other university. Jim thinks he'd make sure I wouldn't be able to get work of any kind anywhere – for the crime of being friendly with his son. Jim said... he made the mistake of being too friendly with his work partner who disappeared a couple of years ago. He's sure his father had something to do with that disappearance. The man doesn't want his son partnered with anyone other than a woman – but at the same time, after his divorce, he brainwashed his sons into thinking that women were worthless."

"Though women who work have to be... not proper women?"

"But safe for Jim to work with, despite his opinion of women, which is a real double standard. Unfortunately, his father knows that Jim thinks he's gay. Jim thinks that it's possible his father's attitude towards women made him gay. But I don't think he actually is. I think he's just been too conditioned to think of women as not worth his attention."

"Okay," Jack said. "So what is that devious mind of yours planning?"

"Devious? Moi?" Blair asked innocently.

"Yes, you."

Blair grinned. "Well, earlier, before I came in, I contacted Norman Burke. He's going to do some digging into Ellison Enterprise's finances."

Jack's smile broadened.

"And then I wondered if you... " He hesitated.

"Just ask me."

"I'm no slouch when it comes to computer hacking, but I'm a rank amateur compared to you. I'd like to get a smear campaign going... a suggestion that although he has sons his wife couldn't live with the man – which seems to have been true – so got a divorce, but the real reason was that she discovered he was gay and using her as cover."

"I like it," Jack said.

"I mean, you and I were both dead straight but we both accept that there's nothing wrong with someone being gay. William thinks there is, thinks that it's a deliberate choice – as if anyone would choose a lifestyle that's so condemned by so many people, even though it's been decriminalized in a lot of places now. And of course he isn't going to know where the... well, accusation originated. He doesn't have any close male friends, but it's easy enough to slant that towards his being seriously in denial. Sailing in a felucca up de Ni-ale," he finished in a sing-song voice.

Jack looked thoughtful. "Can do," he said.

"Of course you can," Blair agreed.

"And while I know you'd rather it was forgotten... How about an anonymous letter to the Cascade Times claiming that William Ellison is threatening the recipient of an Air Force Medal of Honor and a Purple Heart? We don't need to go into details of just what you did – but every man of us will help you in any way we can, Blair, and still count our debt to you unpaid."

"Let's hold that in reserve," Blair said. "And Jack, what I did... I didn't do it to put any of you in debt to me. It was common humanity, and hell, it saved my life too. And this campaign against William Ellison – that's common humanity as well, to help Jim. Free Jim from his father's manipulation. Let Jim have a life where he's able to work with whoever he wants, have friends... "

"That's why we'll never consider our debt to you paid, Blair – because you don't see it as owing you anything. You're not asking for my help now for yourself – you're asking it for Jim Ellison."

"If I honestly thought it would benefit Jim, I *would* leave," Blair said seriously. "Cut my losses. Start over in another university, go for a new dissertation subject. But as I see it, my leaving wouldn't be of any benefit to Jim, and would actually be to his detriment. So that leaves me with no option but to fight. And while I have no doubt that William Ellison can fight dirty... "

"You can fight dirtier," Jack finished.

"If I must," Blair said quietly.

"All right. That's all? You want a few quiet hints planted that the real reason for the man's divorce was because he was gay and trying to hide it by marrying."

"Yes, to start with. You know a lot, Jack – do you know anything about the divorce?"

"No, sorry. But Norman might."

"Or might be able to discover something... I'll check that with him tomorrow and if there's the possibility of any real dirt there, I'll get back to you on it." He glanced at his watch. "I must get going – I'm giving a lecture in five minutes."

"See you tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. Meanwhile, start spreading that rumor, please, and I'll do some checking up tonight and see if I can come up with more ammunition to use against the man."

Blair headed off to give his lecture, and if half his mind was elsewhere so that he delivered the lecture on autopilot, his students certainly didn't notice. He gave the class an assignment for the next week – for once making it a reading-only one instead of asking them to write something. He would, he decided, give them a multiple choice test based on it the following week – easy for him to mark, it was something that would leave him free to concentrate on his fight with William.

He had an hour before the next lecture he had to give that day, and he spent most of it compiling that multiple choice test, throwing in one or two choices aimed at catching out the unwary. The students would be able to leave as they finished, he could start marking them as soon as papers began to be handed in, and that would give him time to mark a lot of them, if not most, before the end of the hour. He was well aware that his actions against William Ellison would probably take quite some time to be effective, and while there were several men he could ask for help as well as the two he had already involved, he couldn't expect them to do everything; he had to play his part in making William respect the power of the 'long-haired queer'. It therefore made sense to not spend hours in the evenings on university work if there was any way he could reduce those hours while not neglecting his students.

Because although he had said he didn't understand how anyone could have the sort of power Ellison seemed to have, it was more accurate to say he didn't understand how anyone would want to use that sort of power, especially for personal gain. He certainly didn't.

His next class was a lecturer's dream; all attentive, all genuinely interested, all – even the three football jocks – wanting to learn, not just marking time in a class they had to take to make up their academic requirements. As one of the three had said to him early in the semester – "It makes sense to have a good academic qualification. Life as a player could be quite short – easy

to suffer an injury that doesn't actually handicap you in your everyday life, but makes it pretty well impossible to play any sport at professional level. And while we all have sports scholarships, all that means is that we were good enough to get a scholarship. It doesn't mean we'll ever be picked up by a top team. Although obviously we're hoping for it, we might never have a really satisfactory career in football. Under those circumstances a good academic qualification means we've got a better choice than flipping burgers or stocking supermarket shelves."

Blair had nodded. "I hope you do get a decent career in football, but you're right – an academic qualification is a good fall-back, even if you don't need to use it until you're old enough that you want to retire from playing."

"I know some of the guys hope to become coaches once they're too old to play, but heck, there are far more retired players than there are positions for coaches."

"That how all three of you feel?"

"Yes. Oh, it's possible to make good money as a player and if you're careful and actually save a lot of it you possibly wouldn't ever need to work once your career is over – but who wants to be retired at thirty-five?"

"It's good to see young men as sensible as you are," Blair had said, quietly ignoring the fact that he wasn't much older than the students he was teaching – although he had far, far more life experience than any of them.

He had been planning on giving them a written assignment for the following week; now he decided to make the following week's lecture a discussion. Give them a week to research it. Hmm... subject? It would have to be something fairly controversial to start – and keep – them talking...

Blair was still thinking about possible subjects as he left his office and headed off to give his next lecture.

Although he stopped to buy some groceries, he still beat Simon home, and prepared a meal that would take only a few minutes to cook once Simon did arrive. Then he turned his attention to his laptop. He had some investigating to do...

He had said to Jack that Norman might be able to dig up something on the Ellison divorce, but Blair was quite sure he'd be able to discover the info for himself. He thought for a moment; he needed a starting point to save searching through a great many years. Had Jim actually said how old he was when his mother walked out?

No... just that he was a boy. Okay... Jim did say 'hadn't spoken to his father for twenty years... ' Assume Jim was eighteen at that point – when he joined the army? – go another eight years

earlier? To when Jim was ten? That would work. And if he found nothing in the... say five... years before that, he could start searching the next two or three years, until Jim was twelve or thirteen. But he really didn't think that Jim would call himself a 'boy' if he was more than ten.

He found the record of the divorce in 1968. Jim was six; his brother was four.

Blair wasn't totally surprised to discover that it was very acrimonious, with each party accusing the other of having totally unreasonable expectations, of behaving in a totally unreasonable way. However, he was surprised to discover that Mary Grace Ellison, nee MacDonald, had wanted nothing from William – no alimony, no visiting rights with her sons. All she wanted was the divorce... which rather made nonsense of William's oft-repeated claim to Jim that she wanted to beggar him, his insistence to Jim that 'women were only out for what they could get'.

With Jim's mother's name to go on, Blair was about to investigate further when he heard the front door opening. Instantly, he closed the file he had been studying and called up his dissertation notes, scrolled rapidly down to make it look as if he'd been reviewing them, then got up and headed for the kitchen. He reached the living room door just as it opened.

"Hi, Simon. Dinner'll be ready in ten minutes."

"Blair. You didn't have to do that – "

"I know, but I want to share the routine. Can't expect you to do everything." He headed into the kitchen and turned on a burner, then put the pan onto it. "Anything exciting happen today?"

"Not really. We got a break on the Poynter case – turned out there was a witness. He'd been working late, was quite surprised to see anyone else in that area at that time of night. He saw a fight, hadn't realized that it was anything more than just two guys who had fallen out having a brawl, though he pulled back into the shadows to avoid being involved – but after he saw the report in the paper and thinking it over, he decided to call in, tell us what he saw, just in case."

"That's good," Blair said. The murder of businessman Darren Poynter near the docks three days previously had left Joel Taggart and his partner Tom Wallace feeling that they were knocking their heads against a brick wall.

"Or not," Simon muttered as he turned into the bathroom. "It has all the marks of a very carefully orchestrated hit." He closed the door.

Blair frowned as he stirred the contents of the pan. Just who would benefit by Poynter's death?

Simon rejoined him, and got out plates; Blair paused long enough to close the laptop – having left it open so that Simon, if he looked, would think that he had been working on his dissertation – then served the meal. As they ate, Simon was duly appreciative of it. After they finished, he washed up while Blair dried and put everything away, then they settled down again in front of the television, and Blair asked Simon that same question.

"That's what we've been trying to find out," Simon said as he switched on and turned to the sports channel. "And the answer is, nobody obvious. He's been successful, but in a modest way, so it's not anyone jealous of his success; he's been known for scrupulous honesty in his dealings so it's not someone who thinks he's been cheated... "

"Any chance he's told someone running a protection racket to get lost, and this is... well, a warning to whoever inherits to fall into line?"

"We thought of that, but it seems unlikely," Simon said. "Usually with something like that there are small 'problems' first, escalating if whoever is the target remains intransigent. Murder is the last resort. There was nothing like that with Poynter's business. Unless he kept it totally to himself, didn't even tell his secretary, there were no threats made, no offer of 'protection'.

"From what the witness said, Poynter met someone, apparently by pre-arrangement, the two men spoke for a minute then turned and started walking down the road together as if they were going to the docks, but before they'd gone more than a few yards something made them start fighting. One man was apparently punched in the chest and stomach and fell, the other walked away."

"Walked? You'd expect him to have run, wouldn't you," Blair said. "He'd want to get away from the scene of his crime quickly."

"Remember, Poynter was actually knifed. According to Dan Wolf, he died quickly. The killer obviously knew what he was doing, thought the street was deserted, and didn't see any reason to draw attention to himself by leaving that street and running into another one where there could be someone to see him. You see a man running down an apparently empty street, you're going to wonder why. Nobody pays attention to someone walking. Or possibly jogging, but anyone jogging wouldn't be wearing ordinary clothes."

"And the guy who saw this didn't think to go and check the one who'd fallen?"

"The good old 'don't get involved' syndrome. He thought it was just someone who'd been punched and either knocked out or had the wind totally knocked out of him, that he'd recover, get up, swear, and go about his business. It didn't occur to him that the guy had been killed."

Blair nodded, and turned his attention to the game playing on TV.

Simon headed for bed not long after ten, saying, "Watch TV as long as you want – I won't hear anything."

"That's okay, Simon – I need to do some more work on the diss," Blair replied as he reached for his laptop. However, rather than working with the dissertation file – which in any case was well up to date, for adding to it and doing a bit of self-editing was something he did at frequent intervals – he decided to see what he could discover about Darren Poynter's business, though

he wasn't sure why he wanted to hide that from Simon. Or no, he *was* pretty sure – he didn't want Simon to know how good a hacker he was.

It was easy enough for him to call up info on Poynter.

Darren Poynter was a relatively small-time importer of luxury items, which he sold in a shop in one of Cascade's better-quality malls. He employed only four staff – a secretary who kept the books and handled the – well, grunt work of ordering items, making sure the shop was well supplied with goods; a man who worked part time, handling the 'heavy' work in the small warehouse where the goods were stored between import and being taken to the shop; and two female staff who served in the shop. Poynter himself seemed to spend much of his time traveling, looking for new items to import. Which, Blair conceded, made sense; it was a fairly limited market, and the continual provision of new items meant continual sales.

What it didn't do was give him any ideas he could toss in Simon's direction.

He glanced at his watch. Getting the info on Poynter had taken less than half an hour; he could take a little while to try following up on Mary Grace MacDonald, now that he had a name for Jim's mother.

And came up totally blank.

There was nothing after the divorce was finalized. No mention anywhere of a Mary MacDonald, with or without the middle name Grace, in Cascade.

Blair nodded to himself. It was possible that she had left Cascade, changed her name and, while not exactly going into hiding... gone into hiding. Though she wouldn't necessarily have had to change her name – it was amazing how many people had the same name, though some were more common than others.

But in the name of all the gods and goddesses... she had given William two sons... and been left with nothing. She had asked for nothing except her freedom, but it was clear to Blair that if she had asked for anything, no matter how little, William would have fought her claim; and even back in 1968 he was rich enough that he wouldn't really have missed... say \$20,000, roughly the equivalent of a year's salary for three to five of his workers – assuming he paid them the going rate, and not something below it.

It would have cost William very little, and given his ex-wife some degree of security. It was a pretty fair condemnation of the man that he wasn't willing to do that.

He closed the laptop and went to bed.

He slept well, but still woke early. He lay for some minutes savoring the comfort, then got up. It was 4:30 – too early to start making any noise, but he could access his laptop; that wouldn't disturb Simon.

This time he hacked police records. Well, it was barely hacking – he did have some access, so that he could check back on cases to provide background for the work he was doing on his dissertation – he just didn't have official access to the file he needed.

Jack Pendergrast.

Blair read through the file. There had been a kidnap – Philip Brackley, son of a lumber tycoon. Spoiled son of a lumber tycoon. Warren Brackley had admitted that when his son had been younger, he had given him anything and everything he wanted. However, young Philip's demands had become more and more outrageous, and finally Warren had had enough. He told Philip that he would get an allowance, and no more; a generous allowance, but much less than Philip had been accustomed to getting just by asking. The kidnap and ransom demand had followed two months later. Warren had been convinced that the young man – whose eighteenth birthday had been some four months earlier – had staged his own kidnap to fleece his father out of a million dollars, and had been more than reluctant to pay, saying that it was time the boy grew up. His intention had been to ignore it, sure that Philip would arrive home in a day or two, maybe claiming to have escaped from his kidnapers. Indeed, it wasn't Warren who had called the police but his wife Monique, Philip's stepmother.

However, because of the ransom note, it had been declared a crime (even if it was a hoax, as Warren suggested). Warren had reluctantly agreed to let the police investigate, deciding that when Philip did come home, he would allow the police to question the young fool, arrest him if necessary, and let him learn a lesson from it.

It was decided that a cop who had been shown a picture of young Philip should deliver the ransom money; and if it was Philip who joined him to collect it, he would immediately arrest him. Jack Pendergrast had been selected as that cop.

However, Jack disappeared that night and Philip Brackley was never seen again.

IA's conclusion was that when Philip came to collect the money, Jack had killed him rather than arrest him, hidden the body and vanished along with the million dollars.

Blair frowned as he read that. It seemed too... too convenient. His instinct was that the kidnapers had killed Jack – and Philip. He could understand them killing Philip, but why kill the man who was delivering the money? All they needed to do was say something like, "Right, the boy will be released near his home later tonight." Unless Jack had tried to arrest whoever had arrived to collect the money, and been killed as a result.

Unlikely. Getting Philip Brackley back alive was more important than arresting his kidnapper while the boy was still a prisoner somewhere. Blair's time observing the police make him sure of that.

So in some ways that made sense of Jim's suspicion that his father had had something to do with it. Hire a hit man to kidnap the boy, then visit Warren Buckley, a fellow businessman, to commiserate and find out what was happening, persuade him to suggest that Jack Pendergrast deliver the ransom money, then get his hit man to go to collect the money and kill Jack in the process. He could even have used the ransom money to pay off the hit man – a million dollars of what wasn't even his own money.

All right, William Ellison had to have some way of finding out what was happening at the PD... but if he was paying someone there to keep him in the picture regarding anything concerning Jim or Major Crime... that would also fit with his knowing about Blair. And if his inside man happened to be in Internal Affairs, that would explain IA's very quick conclusion regarding Jack's culpability.

Just as well, Blair thought, that he had Norman Burke on his side... And Jack Kelso. Who else might he involve?

He thought over the names of the men who all believed they owed him. Well... when it came down to it, they did – he had saved their lives during Desert Storm (having achieved his Masters, he had chosen to join the air force at that time), getting them safely back to a US base despite the treatment inflicted on him by the Iraqis, despite suffering a serious injury in the process, an injury that had invalidated him out of the air force... but he would never ask any of them for any favors for himself. This was for Jim...

Pete Lewis? Like Jack and Norman, he lived and worked in Cascade, which several of the others didn't. Pete was in a position to do some digging... not on the internet, but through his position as an archivist in a library. Asking Pete to search through old newspapers would have been a real imposition, really taking advantage of the man, but Blair had some dates now, and that would narrow the search considerably.

He checked the time. Just after six... He couldn't hear any sign that Simon was stirring yet, but it was by far too early to try to contact Norman or Pete.

Anxious though he was to pursue his smear campaign against William Ellison, he had to be realistic. A few more hours before his next move wouldn't, after all, give the man much time to fight back – assuming he had realized yet that he had an enemy and knew who it was. Blair's absence from the PD the previous day would almost certainly have left him with the feeling that he had successfully removed Blair from Jim's life.

Once again Blair accessed his dissertation file, and this time he began to do some work on it, reading through the last chapter he had written with a view to correcting any typos, rewording

the odd sentence, sometimes adding a few words here and there as he remembered something applicable or to clarify something.

It was nearly an hour before he heard movement. He saved what he was doing and went through to the kitchen. Coffee pot on, bread into the toaster ready to be toasted when Simon left the bathroom.

As they ate, Simon went on, "What are your plans for today?"

"For the morning, much the same as yesterday," Blair said. "I've a lecture to give, I have a meeting with one of the Professors – " which was true, he reflected, though it wasn't about university work – "and I'm hoping to see a guy at the library. In the afternoon I'll come in and have a word with Jim, see how he's managing, and maybe have a follow-up word with Rafe and Brown about the vandalism case they're investigating. It sounded like a bad one."

"It is," Simon agreed. Vandalism didn't normally come into the range of crimes investigated by Major Crime, but this particular spate of it was not only doing serious damage, it was costing the city a *lot* of money.

He finished eating, gulped the last of his coffee and took the dishes to the sink.

"Leave them," Blair said. "I'll wash them along with my plate and mug."

"Thanks." Simon grabbed his coat and left. Blair grinned, knowing that because he was there and they'd been talking, Simon was running just a little later than the previous day.

Not a good idea for the Captain to be late too often!

Blair finished his coffee, washed and dried the dishes and put them away, then went to his room, retrieved his memory stick and plugged it in. It was still quite early, but he knew Norman Burke would already be in his office.

Their email exchange only lasted a few minutes, but provided Blair with one new bit of information. William Ellison had recently contacted Darren Poynter. Norman hadn't been able to discover why.

Interesting. Might it be worth mentioning to Simon? Very possibly, but perhaps not yet. He pulled up his new 'WE' file and added that info, closed down his laptop and put the memory stick away in its pocket.

As he drove to Rainier, he was thinking hard.

Once again he arrived earlier than necessary, and spent the time until he could reasonably call on Jack Kelso compiling a multiple choice test based on the following week's assignment he would give that day's students. All right, he could only get away with that kind of easy assignment for a week or two, but considering how much he had already discovered about William Ellison, maybe that would be long enough to escalate the rumor mill?

He checked the time and headed for Jack's office.

"Blair! Come in." Jack was beaming, genuinely happy to see him. "You'd be surprised how much online gossip there is already on that 'Ellison's really gay' hint I dropped yesterday morning."

"With everyone wondering where it came from, of course?"

"Of course. All anyone knows is that the rumor just dropped into their inboxes... Apparently Ellison's fit to chew nails."

Blair grinned appreciatively. "Jack, Norman came up with something else... Darren Poynter."

"Small time businessman found stabbed the other day?"

Blair nodded. "Apparently he'd had a meeting with Ellison a day or two earlier."

Jack stiffened. "You think Ellison... ?"

"I'd hesitate to make a direct accusation yet. There's something I want to check with Pete Lewis – but I'm beginning to think... I'm beginning to think Ellison doesn't make empty threats, trusting to bluff to gain him what he wants. I'm beginning to think that Jim could be wise believing them. He might or might not have had something to do with the disappearance of Jim's partner two years ago – "

"But Jim believes he did." Jack repeated Blair's words of the previous day.

"I did some digging last night. The investigation into his disappearance seems to have been very thorough, including checking all the legal ways of leaving the country. Now it's possible Pendergrast had some way of adopting a new identity, went out of the country on a false passport, but that wasn't even put forward as the vaguest of suppositions at the time. According to the police records, he just vanished.

"I was sure he'd killed Philip Brackley and taken off with the money, but Ellison Senior is very knowledgeable about what's going on in the PD – how did he know Jim was partnered with me, for example? If he's been paying someone to keep him informed about what was happening... "

"Don't you mean spying on Jim?" Jack asked.

Blair gave a mirthless smile. "You could put it that way." He sighed. "I just wish I knew why Ellison is behaving like this. It could be a form of rebellion against the way he was brought up – anything that gave pleasure was sinful, according to Jim's memories of his grandparents – "

"So if he got nothing, say, material when he was growing up... no allowance or anything like that... If he damned well had to do what he was told without question, even if it seemed pointless... Could he be over-compensating now by making sure he has everything he wants?"

"While at the same time manipulating his sons the way he was manipulated. Well, maybe not quite the same way, but in accordance with the ideas he's adopted." Blair shook his head. "I'm going to see if Pete can dig up anything from old newspapers – if he does, can I ask you to add that to the rumors you're planting?"

"Yes, and I can start planting 'Don't trust Ellison' rumors now, going by the fact that he met Poynter just before the man was killed."

"Thanks, Jack."

"You go and dig up some more dirt on him."

"As much as I can, Jack. As much as I can."

Blair spent the next hour in his 'office', and although two students came to ask him about some aspect of their work, neither took more than a few minutes of his time. He spent the rest of the hour on his WE file, sorting through the facts as he knew them, then when he had a coherent whole, he printed out a copy to give to Pete Lewis.

He then gave his one lecture of the day, and after dismissing the class stuffed his notes into his pack and took his jacket from where he had draped it over the back of his chair. He didn't need to go back to the office – everything he needed was in his pack. Now for Cascade Public Library.

His car could almost have driven there by itself, it was a journey he had taken so often over the years – the library carried a large number of travel books written for the general public, and Blair had found that these made good bedtime reading while giving him an insight into the kind of thing travel writers could discover about these different countries. Their focus, after all, was different from that of anthropologists.

After parking, he went inside. He knew his way around the building, and headed straight for the archivist's office. There, he knocked on the door.

"Come."

He went in.

"Blair! How are you? It's been a while."

"Hi, Pete. Yes, I've been working on my dissertation. It's not far from being finished – "

"Hey, that's great! You having a party to celebrate when you get your PhD?"

"Well, maybe a small one, and you'll definitely get an invite. Though in a way, because it's on the work of the police, I could carry on writing it for the next fifty years and still not have said everything I could say. I just had to decide that yes, *this* was the cut-off point.

"In a way, though, making that decision was forced on me."

"Forced on you? Now that's something I never thought to hear you say."

"I spent time in all the divisions, ending up with the detectives of Major Crime; Captain Banks partnered me with one particular detective – Jim Ellison."

"Detective of the Year last year, right?"

"Yes. We got on well together, were even forming the beginnings of a friendship, when he got a letter from his father, telling him to – well, to tell Banks he wasn't going to work any longer with an effeminate queer."

Pete stared at him, and then sniggered. "You?"

Blair nodded.

"Effeminate? Queer? Had the guy even met you?"

"No."

"All right, go on."

"His father is William Ellison."

"Ah."

"Yes. Ah. From all I've been able to discover, he's a real piece of work."

"You can say that again," Pete muttered. "I've come across mention of him a few times, and – well... "

"He doesn't come across as someone you'd want to know."

"Certainly not someone I'd want to do business with. Ruthless is putting it mildly."

"He's threatened to have me kicked out of Rainier with the assurance that I'd be denied entry at any other university. Jim thinks his father would also make sure I couldn't get any kind of work anywhere, unless he refuses to have anything more to do with me. And Pete – the way the man is behaving, he's going to destroy Jim."

"All right – what can I do to help you?"

Blair grinned and pulled the printed sheet from his pack. "I've got some facts and dates here. I can't find any details online, especially on the older stuff, but maybe there were newspaper reports at the time. Things that never made it onto the Internet."

Pete glanced over the list. "Divorced in 1968?"

"Thing is, I can't find any info on a Mary, or Mary Grace, Ellison nee MacDonald born in April 1940 after the divorce. Now from what I can make out, even back then William Ellison was well enough known that his divorce would hit the headlines – at least the local ones."

Pete nodded. "Yeah. 'Prominent Cascade businessman divorced'. It would really hit the front page of the Cascade Times."

"And newspapers being what they are... I don't say it would be impossible to silence a story, but... Thing is, I keep wondering what happened to her."

"I'll check it out. See if the papers at the time had anything to say."

"Thanks."

"It shouldn't take me long – from what you've given me here I should be able to go straight to the issues that are likely to have the info. Want to wait while I get them?"

Blair glanced at his watch. "Wish I could, but I need to check up with two of the detectives about a case they're working on – although I've decided on now as the stopping point for my diss, I don't want to leave anything unsolved, as it were. If I go now, I'll catch them before they go for lunch – but if I come back, say about three?"

"I should definitely have something for you by then."

"Thanks, Pete. I'm gonna owe you for this."

"No, you won't."

"I won't argue with you about it, but I'll definitely owe you, Norman and Jack for your help with this."

"You're determined to bring William Ellison down, aren't you."

"Well... determined to knock him down to size. Determined to free his sons from his influence. Determined to get justice for all the people I suspect him of victimizing for the past... oh, thirty years at least."

"You know what?" Pete said. "He doesn't stand a chance."

Blair drove into the police garage, parked in one of the visitor spaces and took the elevator up to Major Crime. As he walked in, he glanced around. Good – Jim, Brown and Rafe were all there.

He went straight to Jim's desk. "Hi, Jim. How're you doing?" *Not well*, he thought.

"Blair! You shouldn't be talking to me."

"How are you doing?" Blair repeated.

Jim sighed. "Not good," he admitted. "I... That month we were working together... I don't know what it was, but everything seemed easier... But this past two days... without you here... "

"I was helping you control your senses. All tribal sentinels had someone who helped them. No matter how much control you have, there's always the risk of a spike or a zone."

"I... I do appreciate that. But the danger to you if my father hears you've been talking to me... or, rather, that I've talked to you..."

"Does he think I'm going to have my lecherous way with you in the middle of the bullpen with half a dozen other detectives present?"

"I wouldn't put it past him."

"Just... be careful, Jim. Be very circumspect in the use of your senses. And who knows? He might have second thoughts and change his mind about me."

"William Ellison change his mind?" Jim said bitterly. "That'll be the day the sun rises in the west."

"I don't deny some things are impossible," Blair said. "Like I couldn't jump out that window and fly by just flapping my arms pretending I was a bird. But even the most opinionated person can change his mind about something if he gets new and irrefutable information about it. And Jim – there are things he still has to learn about me. Now you be careful!"

He turned away, knowing that he was distressing Jim, and walked over to Brown and Rafe, who admitted they were making little headway in the vandalism cases.

"Who or what are being targeted?" Blair asked. "Have you been able to establish if there's any sort of pattern?"

"Not that we can see – it's not always the same MO," Brown grumbled. "but people are losing their businesses because of it and people are being thrown out of work. One small business had a fire that was easily proved to be arson, but the CEO had no reason to get his own business torched; he was making money steadily. When he went to claim on his insurance, they said he hadn't renewed his policy and denied the claim."

Blair whistled softly.

"Hairboy?"

"Oh – nothing, really. Just – it's amazing what some insurance companies will do to avoid paying out. Go on."

"Another business – a pipe leading from a water tank in the roof gave way, but there was no reason for it – the entire system was renewed less than a year ago. The ceiling collapsed overnight, a lot of the firm's records were lost through water damage, and the water found its way to the office below and caused a lot of damage there. The second office sued the first one, which was already in serious financial difficulties because of the damage they'd suffered – hey, there's a pattern! They tried to claim on their insurance, and were told they hadn't renewed their policy the previous month! Even though they had a receipt saying they had. The company insisted that the person who'd signed the receipt wasn't one of their staff. That the check had obviously been stolen, and because it hadn't reached them..."

"Were they both insured with the same company?" Blair asked.

Brown glanced at him, then scabbled through the paperwork. "Yes, they were. Now why didn't I see that?" he muttered.

"Because you were concentrating on the actual vandalism?" Blair asked. "What company was it?"

"Cascade Mutual Aid," Brown said almost absently, then his head snapped up. "I shouldn't have told you that!"

Blair grinned. "Don't worry, H, I won't let anyone know you told me." He looked at Rafe. "What about the damage to City property? Any pattern there?"

"There doesn't seem to be," Rafe said gloomily. "Apart from the main damage being to statues. The one of the Mayor before Curtis, for example – the head was knocked off it. Now that would be noisy and take some time, but nobody seems to have seen or heard anything. Okay, there could be intimidation involved, but the vandals would have to intimidate a helluva lot of people, wouldn't they?"

"You'd think so," Blair agreed. "There wouldn't have been... oh, road works going on at the same time, would there?"

Rafe and Brown looked at each other. "Hairboy, you're brilliant! Of course that would cover the noise..." Brown said. "And we call ourselves detectives..."

"Sometimes it's easy to overlook the obvious," Blair grinned.

"You wouldn't like to apply for a job here, would you? Once you've got that PhD?" Rafe asked.

"I could be persuaded," Blair replied. Without being obvious about it, he was watching Jim. "Now I need to think how to incorporate this into what I'm writing about the cases you work..."

"Good luck!" Rafe said.

Blair went back to Rainier after lunch, made some notes about what he wanted to do with his classes for the next week or two, then left again, heading back to the library. He knocked on Pete's door just before three.

"Come. Blair, hello again."

"Hi, Pete."

"I've got quite a bit for you. Once I started looking... William Ellison has been doing more interfering in Cascade's affairs than I think anyone has realized. Of course, people like Mayor Curtis who have owed their position to him for the past twenty years or so would be aware, but because it was to their advantage... "

"Ellison has been supporting Curtis that long?" Mayor Edward Curtis was rabidly Republican and well known for nepotism; and the number of times he had influenced a police investigation was a matter of considerable disquiet, at least among the senior officers in the PD. Blair had been told things 'just between ourselves' by more than one Captain who had reached a stage of 'get this off my chest or bust', and had quietly pushed them into a 'do not talk about this to anyone' corner of his mind.

"Financing him every time he was up for re-election, so that he could always swamp the electorate with his 'Vote for ME' campaign. Nobody else ever had enough money for their campaigns to come anywhere close to defeating him. But although the Cascade Times printed reports, it wasn't until I added them all up that I realized the impact, the influence Ellison has had.

"But that's incidental.

"Your Mary MacDonald."

There was a note in Pete's voice that Blair didn't like. "Yes?"

"She was found dead in Seattle a few days after the divorce became final. She had apparently jumped out of a fifteenth story window. It was declared suicide, but looking at the court record... She'd got what she wanted; the divorce."

"She didn't ask for anything. No alimony, no visiting rights with her sons. She wanted nothing from her husband," Blair agreed.

"Ellison's response to questions was 'No comment'. Not even any sense of regret."

"You don't think it was suicide."

"I think he reacted badly to the fact that she walked out. I think he waited till after the divorce, then had someone push her out of that window."

"I think you could well be right," Blair said.

"Now, Pendergrast... After he disappeared, it emerged that the man did have debts of several thousand dollars – building work being done to his house. The builder was pretty outspoken about it. Claimed Pendergrast had run off to avoid paying."

"He gets work worth thousands of dollars done on his house and then walks away, leaving the house empty, as soon as it's finished? How likely is that?"

"You'd have to be an idiot to even think it."

"Anyway, Jim said Pendergrast wouldn't have taken that ransom money with a man's life at stake."

"That seems to have been the consensus among his fellow detectives."

"Captain Banks did say it was IA who reached the 'walked away with the money' conclusion."

"Though I couldn't find any direct link between his disappearance and Ellison."

"That one was a long shot," Blair agreed. "It was the wife I was most interested in tracking down. I wonder if Jim knows his mother is dead, not just disappeared." He sounded regretful.

"How old was he at the time?"

"Six. All he said was that his mother left."

"Seems to be typical William Ellison. Don't tell the kids Mom is dead, and watch the hope that she'll come back to see them fade and fade..."

"All in the name of teaching them that women can't be trusted."

After he left the library, Blair decided to go and see Norman Burke, rather than email him again. At least, he hoped he'd be able to see Norman. As one of Cascade's top lawyers, he was very busy – first thing in his working day was the best time to catch him via email if you didn't have an appointment.

The receptionist smiled a greeting as he walked up to her desk. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I wondered if it might be possible for Mr. Burke to see me for five minutes – I don't have an appointment, but I can wait for a while if he's busy."

"He *is* pretty busy at the moment," she said, her voice doubtful, but she reached for a phone. "What name will I give him?"

"Blair Sandburg."

She nodded and turned her attention to the phone. "Yes, sir. I have a gentleman here who would like to see you this afternoon if possible – he doesn't have an appointment... Yes, sir – Blair Sandburg." She jumped and pulled the phone away from her ear, apparently in response to a loud noise at the other end.

A door opposite the reception desk opened. "Blair! Come in, come in!"

"If you're busy at the moment – I don't want you to drop whatever you're in the middle of doing just to see me; I can wait for a while."

"Don't be silly! Unless I'm actually in the middle of a meeting, it's everyone else who'll wait till I've seen you, and don't you forget it!"

Blair was half aware of a stunned expression on the receptionist's face as he imagined her thoughts – *Just who is this Blair Sandburg that Mr. Burke will drop everything for?*

Inside his office Norman gestured to a very comfortable-looking chair. "I'm glad you looked in," he said. "I'd have been phoning you tonight if you hadn't." He picked up the phone that he had obviously dropped and put it in its cradle.

"You've found something?"

"A few things. First, Detective Pendergrast.

"At the time of his disappearance the man was seriously in debt."

"Pete did tell me that, but it was all he could tell me."

"The interesting thing is that the debt was incurred just before he disappeared. There had been a fire at his house – fortunately for him, his brother was visiting him at the time and raised the alarm, otherwise the house might have been completely destroyed. However, the insurance company denied his claim, saying that he hadn't renewed his policy the previous month – he insisted he had – but the work needed to be done immediately to make the house wind- and water-tight, not six months down the line while he argued things with the insurance; so he arranged to borrow the money from the bank to pay for the repair. The builder had finished the work, but hadn't actually sent him the bill before he disappeared. Because the loan had been approved, the bank paid the bill, then subsequently repossessed and sold the house to recover that and the money still due on the mortgage. The balance is still sitting there in what might be called a dead account – no known relatives to claim it, but before they could they'd have to prove that he was deceased."

Blair's eyes narrowed. "What insurance company was it?"

"Cascade Mutual Aid."

"Someone there... Major Crime is investigating some vandalism cases, and two appear to be business premises – one had a fire and the other serious water damage. In both cases the insurance company was Cascade Mutual Aid, and in both cases they claimed the policy hadn't been renewed."

Norman looked at him. "Something about that... "

"Smells fishy. Yes."

"All right, leave that for now. Next is Darren Poynter. I told you he'd met William Ellison. I wasn't able to discover anything about that meeting – neither man said anything about it afterwards, or committed anything to writing. What I do know is that Poynter's business was doing well; he was gaining a reputation in Cascade as a man who had a very good eye for business."

"Ellison maybe wanted to dip a finger into Poynter's business? Not quite a protection racket, but a 'come into a partnership with me or I'll destroy your business' threat, with Poynter doing all the work, taking all the risks, and Ellison getting better than half the profits?"

"It seems likely. I had a look at several other quite small but successful businesses, and discovered that Ellison has a controlling interest in several of them. A behind the scenes controlling interest – he doesn't seem to play any active part, just owns more than half the shares."

"The others submitted to Ellison's... well, blackmail? Poynter maybe told him to get lost?" Blair suggested.

"That's the way I see it," Norman agreed.

"Well, I've already asked Jack Kelso to drop a few 'do not trust him' anonymous suggestions into emails. Unfortunately, if his reaction to a refusal to 'partner' with him results in the death of the guy refusing... "

"'Do not trust him' won't accomplish much."

"Yeah – refusal to meet him could – would – count as a refusal to go into 'partnership' with him."

They were both silent for a moment, then Blair went on. "You know, I can't see the man paying out more money than absolutely necessary – he seems to be obsessed with *getting* more and more money, as if he could ever spend a fraction of what he has now. Though if he has to pay out, he will. Pete discovered that he's financed Curtis's election campaigns for at least twenty years; that's a lot of money, but it gets him the ear of the Mayor – he probably considers it

worth the cost. As far as we know he has to have someone in the PD in his pocket, probably someone in a fairly high position, so he knows exactly what's going on there and in law enforcement in the city. Another worth the cost expenditure. Looks like he might have someone in Cascade Mutual Aid bought, too. He has to have a hit man conveniently available, if we assume he's been responsible for the death of one or more people he felt had crossed him. But how much of his influence is based on his reputation as powerful and ruthless?"

"I wonder if he knows how bad an enemy he's made by attacking you," Norman muttered. "The difference is that you only act to help others."

"Actually, I'm beginning to wonder... " Blair said slowly.

"Wonder?"

"Is it fair for me to involve you, Jack and Pete. He's not your enemy – "

"Blair, you know the saying, the enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

"Yes."

"Let me reword it slightly. The enemy of my friend is my enemy."

Blair smiled, his eyes shining with gratitude.

Back at Simon's house, Blair took a few minutes to cut up the vegetables for a stir fry that – again – would take only a few minutes to cook once Simon got home, then turned his attention to reading the WE file on his memory stick. He had, however not reached any conclusion when he heard the front door opening. He quickly closed everything down, and headed for the kitchen.

He was thinking furiously as he heated the wok for the stir fry. The rumor campaign that Jack Kelso was running for him was little more than an annoyance to William Ellison – he was well aware of that – but he was certainly taking some satisfaction from it. Ellison had absolutely no right to assume anything about Blair's sexuality just from his appearance – if he had ever actually seen Blair, and wasn't just forming an opinion from a description, which Blair suspected was a very strong possibility; and if he discovered just who had given Ellison that description...

As he sat with Simon that evening, ostensibly watching television, Blair's mind was working furiously. He was beginning to formulate an idea...

Blair went to the PD with Simon in the morning. He nodded a greeting to Jim, then joined Rafe and Brown, who were getting more and more frustrated by their lack of progress in finding the vandals. They had nothing more to tell him.

"I'm sure you'll find something soon," he said before turning and walking over to Jim.

"How're you doing?" he asked softly.

Jim looked at him, misery in his eyes. "Blair... "

He was interrupted by Simon. "Ellison! My office!"

Something in Simon's voice made Blair follow Jim. Simon looked at him, eyebrows raised, as he slipped into the office.

"There's a problem, isn't there," Blair said quietly.

"Yes." Simon turned his attention to Jim. "Jack Pendergrast's car's been found."

"Where?"

"In the river. You know that bad bend in the road where it runs alongside the river, five miles east of Cascade? A driver misjudged it last night, ended up in the river. He managed to get out all right, and arranged for his car to be recovered this morning. The water's pretty deep there, so they had to send down a diver to attach a line to the car – and he saw another car down there. It would have been easy for the recovery crew to ignore it – well, maybe report it, but nothing more than that because it wasn't part of the job they'd been given, but they hauled it up as well, and then reported it to the police, knowing that it could have been an earlier accident. Okay, it could just as easily have been someone shoving a stolen or too-expensive-to-repair car into the river to get rid of it, but...

"Anyway, a black and white went out. When they checked it over, they found a half-decayed body in the trunk. There was a wallet in the jacket pocket – there was some damage to it, obviously, between the water and the decaying body, but they were able to get a name. Philip Brackley."

Jim drew in a sharp breath.

"The license plate on the car... " Simon went on, almost gently. "It was definitely Jack Pendergrast's. It does make IA's conclusion – "

"No!" Jim interrupted. "If that's Jack's car, he's definitely dead. He loved that car. There's no way he would have shoved it into the river."

"There was no sign of him. If he'd been shot too, wouldn't his body have been in the car?" Simon asked.

"He could have got out to meet the kidnapper, been out of the car when he was shot."

"In that case, why wasn't there any blood found where he was waiting to meet the kidnapper?" Simon asked. "Though that's the one thing that casts doubt on IA's conclusion that he killed young Brackley if it was Brackley who turned up to get the money. No blood at the scene."

Jim frowned. "Captain, the rendezvous point was on that road, but it wasn't anywhere near that corner – there's no parking there. It was further out. What condition was the car in?"

"I haven't seen it, so I don't really know, but... I take your point. It could have been pushed into the river further upstream, been washed down to where it was found – "

"There was that week when the river was really high last winter," Jim went on. "A body could have been washed out of the car and swept on further downstream."

"All right, we'll check to see if any bodies were found in the river in the last – make it since Jack disappeared," Simon said. "But if there weren't... we're back to Jack as the main suspect."

"Not necessarily," Blair said.

Both Jim and Simon jumped. Blair had remained so much in the background that both men had forgotten he was there.

"All right, what am I missing?" Simon asked.

"Three things," Blair said. "First, he might have been killed but the body disposed of somewhere other than in the car – he made a nice convenient scapegoat, after all. Second, he could have been in the car, but if he was washed into the river further upstream, his body could be jammed under something further up; or, third, it could have been carried right down to the sea."

"Well, we can check on any bodies found between where he was to be meeting the kidnapper and the sea, or the shore for two or three miles north and south," Simon conceded.

"South is most likely, the way the currents go," Blair suggested.

"Let's have a word with Serena," Simon said. "Any bodies found would end up with Forensics."

As they made their way to Forensics, Blair deliberately stayed fairly close to Jim. He was aware that Jim was looking worried, but he had decided it was time to push William more than a little. Time to let William see that this time he might well have taken on more than he could chew. That he was not frightening Blair off.

Let William's bought man in the PD report that Blair had been seen in Jim's company, even though it wasn't one on one. Because Blair was quite sure William couldn't get him kicked out of Rainier.

Yes, William might send his hit man after Blair... but Blair wasn't the helpless victim Mary Grace and Darren Poynter had been, or the unwary, not expecting to be attacked one Pendergrast had been – Blair was quite sure William had ordered all three deaths, and possibly more.

Serena proved to be surprisingly informative. Without even checking her records she was able to tell them that the previous winter two women and a teenage boy had been found dead in the river between the bend where Jack's car had been found and the sea; all three had been identified and their bodies claimed by their families. There had been no bodies found upstream from that point.

"What about down the coast?" Simon asked.

"There was one body found a few miles down the coast about a month after the bad flooding. It was male; totally defleshed, and the medical examiner who saw it – not our Dan Wolf, it was someone from Everett – believed that whoever it was had been dead for some years." She hit several keys on her computer. "We got a report on it, but there didn't seem to be any way to identify him – the teeth were in perfect condition, so there were no dental records that could be checked. "Yes – here it is."

Jim looked over her shoulder, reading. Then he looked at Simon. "It's Jack."

"How do you know?"

Jim read, "The posterior digit is missing from the left foot."

"Wouldn't that have been a give-away if the local doctors had been checked?" Blair asked.

Simon shook his head. "He came here as a transfer from Oregon with a clean bill of health; the only medical check he was given was very basic. He was very sensitive about that toe – apparently he was born with only four toes on his left foot.

"He told me because I wanted him to do an undercover stint that was going to involve semi-nudity. He said he'd only do it if he could keep his shoes on at all times."

"I only found out by accident," Jim said. "He got soaked one day, was changing into the dry clothes he had in his locker – and I walked in on him when he was changing his socks."

"And although he did have a doctor, he had the health of superman. He was never ill," Simon finished.

Thanking Serena, they left and went back to Simon's office.

Once there, Simon said, "We'll have to let the Brackleys know about Philip."

"Jack and I were the ones who saw them," Jim said. "I should be the one to go."

"I'll come with you," Blair said.

"Blair... "

"Jim, don't worry about me. Yes, I know you think your father will be able to have me kicked out of Rainier – but actually he won't find it as easy as he thinks, I promise you."

"Blair, he can do anything he wants to."

"He thinks he can do anything he wants to. It's time he learned that he can't."

At Brackley Lumber, Jim was quite surprised to see Monique Brackley sitting in the CEO's chair. "Mrs. Brackley?" he said, his tone making it a question.

"Detective Ellison. Yes, I run the company now, with Art Landis as my foreman. Warren died not long after Detective Pendergrast disappeared with the ransom money for Philip. He had to assume Philip was dead, killed by Pendergrast, and... well... his heart wasn't strong; the stress of not knowing for certain killed him."

"No," Jim said. "Pendergrast didn't kill Philip. He was killed that night by the kidnapers. Philip, we think, was already dead – I'm sorry. His body was put in the trunk of Pendergrast's car, and the car, with both bodies in it, was pushed into the river. It was found earlier today."

There was a perfunctory knock on the door and a man came in. Jim recognized him as Art Landis – Warren Brackley's assistant, but not a man of any great importance in the business when Warren ran it. Now, as foreman... yes, he was undoubtedly Monique Brackley's right hand man.

"Oh – Detective... Ellison, isn't it?"

"Art, he came to tell us... they've found Philip's body... and Detective Pendergrast's."

Jim was aware of Landis's heart rate speeding up. "They did?"

So... Landis knew more than he was admitting? Well, it might be worth while investigating Landis and possibly Monique Brackley, although her heartbeat was holding steady. He nodded. "Obviously this will open the case again, especially since the kidnapers are now confirmed as cop killers." He looked at the woman. "I'm sorry I had to bring you such bad news," he said, though he was far from certain that confirmation of Philip's death was 'bad' news to her. "We'll be in touch if we discover anything."

"Yes... thank you."

"Come on, Chief." Jim led the way out.

About nine that night, Blair's cell phone rang. He glanced at Simon and began to head for his room as he answered. "Sandburg... "

/Blair, it's Eli./

"Eli! How are you?" He closed the living room door behind him.

/I'm fine, but Blair, what have you done to annoy William Ellison?/

"Ah. He's demanding I be kicked out without a penny to my name?"

/A little more than that. He says the daughter of a friend is in one of your classes and that you 'persuaded' her that she would get a better grade if she slept with you, and now she's pregnant and you're refusing to admit liability./

"Can you arrange for me to meet my 'accuser'?"

/Already arranged. Tomorrow morning, 9 am. It might be a good idea to bring a lawyer – I'm sure you'll want to make a counter claim for slander./

"Mmm. You know, it would help him if he would make up his mind what he thinks I am – a seducer of young students or an effeminate queer."

/A... You?/

"You know I'm working with the police for my diss. I've been in several departments, and a month ago moved to Major Crime. Captain Banks had me riding with Jim Ellison – "

/William's son?/

"Yes. William contacted Jim two or three days ago to tell him he was to have nothing more to do with an effeminate queer. It... rather put my back up."

/I can imagine... and on the son's behalf, not your own./

"So today I did rather set out to stir things a bit... but I wonder just who told William that I was partnered with Jim today? Because someone must have, and while I suspect the man of paying someone in the PD to keep an eye on Jim, we didn't actually meet anyone there when we were on our way out; everything was fairly quiet."

/Just be careful, Blair./

Blair smiled. "Eli, I'm always careful."

/I can think of one occasion when you weren't... and you're not being careful now. But this is another rescue mission for you, isn't it./ It wasn't a question.

"I suppose it is," Blair admitted. "Eli, just between ourselves – it's not just because William is bullying Jim. Jim's a sentinel, but William won't admit it... "

/The man's a fool./

"But a ruthless one."

/He's still a fool. By the way, Blair... /

"Yes?"

/Tomorrow... come wearing your medals./

"You definitely want me to have grounds for slander, don't you."

/Let's just say his attitude rather put my back up too... and Eric's./

As he hung up, Blair smiled again. Eric Stoddard... Eli's brother, and the Rainier Principal... and the father of another of the ten men whose lives Blair had saved during Desert Storm.

Then he dialed Norman, hoping that Norman had meant it when he said 'everyone else will wait till I've seen you, and don't you forget it!'

He had.

Blair rejoined Simon for a while, saying, "Sorry about that, but I've been called in to a meeting at Rainier first thing tomorrow."

"That's unusual, isn't it?"

"Apparently a student is claiming I seduced her and left her pregnant... but it's something I can easily disprove."

"You're sure about that?"

"Yes," Blair said. He was going to have to reveal to William Ellison something that he would have preferred to keep secret, but the devil was driving events...

They turned their attention back to the television, but Blair was unsurprised when, at around 10 pm, Simon stretched and said, "I'm off to bed. Goodnight, Sandburg."

"Goodnight, Captain. I won't be long behind you."

Blair gave Simon long enough to finish in the bathroom and retire to his room, then he switched the TV off and he, too, headed for bed.

He lay wondering who could have told William he had been with Jim that day. Granted there were security cameras, but the men manning those were rotated; unless William had several cops paid to report to him, it seemed unlikely that one of them had betrayed Blair's presence with Jim.

The only people who had actually seen them together were Monique Brackley and Art Landis... and there was that link between Brackley and Pendergrast... Blair hadn't taken to Monique, but she'd struck him as... more or less like William; the sort of person who would pay someone else to do her dirty work. And who more likely than Art Landis, the man she had promoted from a sort of general assistant to foreman?

Yes; it might be worth digging into Landis' background...

Once again he woke early – hardly surprising considering he was going to bed rather earlier than his usual time – and switched on his laptop. Once again he accessed police files – this time looking for any indication that Art Landis had any sort of record.

Art... Short for Arthur? He couldn't, offhand, think of any other name that would shorten to 'Art'. Of course, it could be a nickname...

There was nothing. No record for anyone with the second name Landis. Oh well, it had been a long shot... but he still suspected him of being the possible source of William's knowledge of his movements the previous day.

After breakfast Blair changed into his good suit, and slipped the box with his medals into his pocket; he would pin them on after he got to Rainier.

He met Norman a few minutes before nine. Norman pinned on his medals to make sure they were straight and then, side by side, they made their way to Eric Stoddard's office, reaching it with two minutes to spare, and waited.

On the stroke of nine, Blair knocked and entered, Norman behind him.

Eric was sitting behind his desk; Eli Stoddard was unobtrusive in a chair beside the window; and two men sat in chairs to one side of Eric's desk. Two empty chairs waited at the other side.

It was obvious which of the two men was William Ellison; there was a calculating sneer on the face of the older man. The younger one took one look at Norman, who nodded to him, and seemed to shrink into himself.

William looked at Blair; his eyebrows lifted slightly as he saw the medals. "Trying to impress us with replica medals bought from a fancy dress shop?" His voice dripped condescension.

Norman took a small recorder from his pocket. "Would you care to repeat that, sir," he said as he switched it on.

"I say that *Mr.* Sandburg is trying to impress us by wearing replica medals he obviously bought from a fancy dress shop."

"Mr. Sandburg doesn't need to buy replica medals," Eric Stoddard said quietly.

"Is he trying to claim that he is wearing those legitimately? What did he try to claim he did?"

"Mr. Sandburg was a helicopter pilot in Desert Storm," Eric said. "His helicopter was shot down; he was captured by the Iraqis, and imprisoned with several other U.S. combatants. Although he'd been injured when he was shot down, and subsequently tortured by the Iraqis, through his actions all but one of the other prisoners escaped. Although all twelve men were illtreated, the worst treatment was given to Shahin Hamidi, whose parents were Iranian although he was born in America, and Blair Sandburg, because he had a Jewish name. Shahin died of his injuries. The eleven survivors managed to get out of their prison one night and steal a helicopter; and despite having being seriously injured, Mr. Sandburg piloted it back to an American base, collapsing just minutes after landing. Without him, there would have been no escape."

William gave a harsh laugh. "And he told you that?"

"No," Eric said. "My son is one of the men he rescued that day."

"I was another of the men he rescued," Norman said quietly.

The younger man with William touched his arm and murmured something too quietly for anyone else in the room to hear. William looked sharply at the man – Blair supposed, his lawyer – who nodded.

"I don't think we need to list everyone who was involved," Norman went on, "but I will mention one – Dan Archer. He's the nephew of the current Secretary of State."

William looked at him, a slightly stunned expression on his face. Blair had to fight to keep his own face expressionless – knowing that William was just beginning to realize that the twenty-something grad student he was attacking had some powerful friends.

Norman went on. "However, I understand that you're here on behalf of a young lady who claims Mr. Sandburg used his position to coerce her into sleeping with him and is pregnant as a result. I would ask – where is the young lady? What is her name?"

"She is understandably nervous of meeting Mr. Sandburg – "

"Or perhaps she knows Mr. Sandburg wouldn't recognize her... if she even exists," Norman said.

"Are you accusing me of lying?" William demanded.

"Someone is." He looked at Blair. "I'm afraid the details of what happened to you at the hands of the Iraqis – "

"If it must be told, so be it," Blair said. "I do wish, however, that Mr. Ellison would keep his accusations consistent – though a young woman left pregnant is undoubtedly more of an emotional accusation than a young man forced into a sexual relationship in return for a passing

grade – though that accusation, considering Mr. Ellison's view that I 'have all the signs of being homosexual' would have the merit of being consistent."

"Plenty of homosexuals hide by having a relationship with a woman," William said, scorn in his voice.

"That is possibly true," Norman agreed. "However, as a result of his time as a prisoner, Mr. Sandburg is incapable of having a sexual relationship with anyone – male or female."

"What?" William's voice dripped disbelief.

"If you insist on details – "

"It's an easy claim to make."

"And if I can prove it?" Blair asked quietly.

"Medical records are easy to fake."

He's a stubborn bastard, Blair thought. "What about physical evidence?"

William stared at him. "Physical?" For the first time he showed signs of uncertainty.

Blair stood, quietly unfastened his trousers, dropped them and his boxers and lifted the front of his shirt.

William's jaw dropped as he looked at Blair's groin.

Although his scrotum was still there, Blair had no penis, only a nasty scar where it should have been. "At least the Iraqis gave me some medical attention," he said. "They didn't want me bleeding to death just then; they'd already lost Shahin to blood loss from the same mutilation. They didn't want either of us – members of, in their view, inferior races – to be able to produce children, while at the same time... removing our penises was, they felt, more shaming to us than removing our balls. They hadn't decided whether to let me live, but they did want me alive to torture some more. They even gave me three days to recover from the shock to my system of having it removed without any anesthetic. We escaped on the third night."

"So," Norman said as Blair refastened his trousers, "your young friend will have to find someone else to blame for her condition. Possibly the man who really did father her child?"

"Mr. Sandburg could very well sue you for slander, Mr. Ellison. How do you think a jury would react to what you have learned today?"

"I... "

Blair suspected that it was the first time in his life that William had been speechless.

The man who was probably his lawyer touched William's arm and said something. William replied, a furious look on his face. Then the lawyer said quietly, "Mr. Ellison is prepared to offer compensation for the slight."

"I don't need his money," Blair said quietly. "What I do want as compensation is for him to stop interfering in the life of his older son, James." He looked directly at William. "Leave James to live his own life, Mr. Ellison, to have friends without you trying to destroy them. If you don't, I *will* take you to court for slander, and with Mr. Burke as my lawyer – " He didn't need to say anything more.

"Agreed," Ellison growled. He looked at his lawyer, jerked his head towards the door, and marched out. The lawyer looked at Blair, at Norman, apology on his face, and followed.

After a moment, Norman looked at Blair. "Are you really prepared to let things go at that?"

Blair shook his head. "For myself, yes; I simply wanted him to leave Jim alone. But there are still three people – at least three, and probably a lot more – that I believe he ordered killed. And they deserve justice."

Two days later, when Blair walked into Major Crime, Jim looked at him without nervousness. Blair grinned and went over to Jim's desk.

"I got this letter this morning," Jim said. "'James – I have learned some things about Mr. Sandburg. It appears he is more of a man than I was led to believe. I withdraw my objection to you having to work with him. William Ellison.' What did you do, Chief?"

"I told you there were things he didn't know about me. He knows some of them now." Blair smiled. "Let it go at that, Jim. I'm not proud of – well, boasting about a couple of things. But when he confronted me at Rainier, it was the only way to make him take me seriously."

"So he did try to make good on his threat to have you kicked out of Rainier?"

"And he failed."

Jim was silent for a moment. "He's not going to be happy about that."

"He wasn't," Blair agreed. "And I'm not taking this climb down at face value. He'll make another move. But I'm expecting it."

Nothing happened for a few days – long enough for anyone less wary than Blair to relax and think he'd definitely won. During that time he quietly continued his private investigation into William Ellison, and extended his search for information on Art Landis into other areas.

Neither he nor Jack Kelso could dig up any additional potential scandal concerning William. Art Landis, however...

Until two years previously, Landis had been a mere assistant to Warren Brackley – his wage, rising a little each year, probably in line with inflation, paid direct to his bank. A reasonable wage, but nothing spectacular. However, he didn't appear to have withdrawn any of that money. On the other hand, he been making regular cash deposits as well for at least thirty years. The amount did vary somewhat. Twenty-two months earlier – which would be about the time Monique Brackley took over the running of the lumber company – not only had his pay had gone up considerably, his regular cash payments had as well.

Now... did that mean he had always been paid more by Brackley Lumber than officially went through the books... or did it mean another source of income? Something that, twenty-two months earlier, had suddenly also increased?

It might be well worth while keeping an eye on Art Landis.

And then one day, some three weeks after his confrontation with William, Blair was sitting in his 'office' when the door opened.

About to snarl at the student who dared to enter without knocking first, Blair stiffened just a little when he saw that his visitor was Art Landis.

"Mr. Landis?" he asked as if he wasn't totally sure that that was indeed who his visitor was. He dropped his right hand to below his desk, while keeping the left one in full view.

"You made a serious mistake, Mr. Sandburg," Landis said. Having closed the door, he remained standing firmly just inside it.

"I did? In what way? All I ever did that concerned you was accompanying Detective Ellison when he went to tell the Brackleys that Philip's body had been found."

"You should have accepted that Mr. Ellison considered you an unacceptable companion for his son. You should have had the sense to leave Cascade and never return."

"You've been working for Mr. Ellison as well as the Brackleys? Disposing of people he wanted rid of? For how long? Was his wife the first?"

"You're too clever for your own good, Mr. Sandburg. Unfortunately you won't be able to share your knowledge with anyone." Landis smiled – a cold, calculating smile. "No, she was not the first. The first was his brother – such an unfortunate accident... Vibration must have loosened one or two screws in his car, and the steering failed... And his wife – so sad. Falling out of that window... I've mostly been really imaginative when it came to disposing of people who were an inconvenience to Mr. Ellison."

"I see... So what you're saying is that you've been a hit man for William Ellison for at least thirty years?"

"Yes, and I've been good at it. Almost every time has been ruled an accident. The only previous time I had to use a gun was to kill Detective Pendergrast... and of course dear Philip. Though they should have remained a mystery; I didn't expect the car would even be found."

"Was Philip collateral damage then, or did Monique want rid of him?" Blair asked, almost casually.

"She wasn't sorry when he didn't return home."

"Did she actually know he was dead?"

"No. But she did think it was... likely. The suggestion that Pendergrast had killed him and disappeared with the ransom money seemed quite probable."

"But it was you who kept the money?"

"Why not? Mr. Ellison didn't want it, and it was a nice bonus for me."

Blair nodded. "And before you kill me, can you satisfy my curiosity about Darren Poynter. You knifed him? Why?"

"He refused Mr. Ellison's proposal that they go into partnership. But now – you've kept me talking long enough, Mr. Sandburg. It's time for you to go."

Blair smiled. "I don't think so," he said as his right arm snapped up and forward.

The heavy paperweight Blair kept on a shelf under his desk hit Landis on the head; he staggered back against the door. Blair leaped forward, caught Landis' arm and jerked it up behind his back, forcing him onto the ground, face down. Then Blair casually knelt on the man's shoulders. Using his left hand he continued to apply pressure to the twisted arm, while with his right he reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

He pressed the appropriate button on speed dial.

"Campus Security."

"Blair Sandburg, Artifact Storage Room 3. I have an intruder who has threatened to kill me."

"Someone is on the way, and I'll call the police now."

"Thanks." He pushed the phone back into his pocket.

It was two or three minutes before the door opened and Suzanne Tamaki entered.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yes. But unless he was planning to force me out, kill me somewhere else, he has a gun."

Suzanne pulled on a pair of latex gloves – not something she needed often, but she had found it was useful to carry them just in case – and searched Landis' pockets. Sure enough, she pulled out a gun. She put it on Blair's desk.

Landis' struggles were getting stronger, and Blair increased the pressure on the captive arm.

There was the clattering of feet in the corridor, and two Patrol officers swung into the room. Blair glanced up and grinned at them.

"Hi, Don, Howard."

"Blair! Are you all right?" Don Perkins was already covering Landis with his gun.

"Yes. This is Art Landis – works for Brackley Lumber, and moonlights as a hit man. He underestimated me quite a bit; not a mistake you'd expect an experienced hit man to make, but he made it."

Suzanne had already backed off; now Blair released Landis, rose quickly and moved to where Landis couldn't try to grab him.

Art Landis, however, was still half stunned. He pushed himself to a sitting position and stayed there for some seconds, head lowered, before he clambered to his feet.

Don quietly recited the Miranda as Howard Frew handcuffed the man. Don then looked at Blair. "We'll get him down to the station – will you be following us in?"

"In a minute or two – I need to make a phone call and pick up a tape first, but I won't be more than ten minutes behind you. When I get there I'll be reporting first to Captain Banks. Oh – and tell Booking – don't let Landis make his statutory phone call until Banks speaks to them."

"You think he'd phone the guy who ordered the hit rather than a lawyer?"

"I think it likely. It's not for my sake – it's to make sure we get justice for a murdered cop."

"You got it."

Don and Howard hustled Landis out.

Blair reached under his desk and pressed a switch; then he crossed to a corner and retrieved a small movie camera.

Suzanne smiled appreciatively. "You got that installed after that female student accused Tony Chavez of molesting her?"

"Yes. Whether I switch it on depends on who comes in, but as soon as I saw it was Landis... " He pulled out his phone and quickly dialed a number.

"Hello – can I have a word with Mr. Burke, please? Blair Sandburg... Hi, Norman." He explained quickly what had happened, then hung up. "Right – thanks for your help, Suzanne. Now I'd better get down to the PD with this – " he flourished the camera. "Goddess, I never thought we'd find it so easy to get the proof... " His voice faded as he left the room and headed down the corridor.

Simon – and Jim – and Rafe and Brown, called in because of the link to the arson and flooding of the two businesses – and Norman Burke – watched the tape from Blair's 'office' in stunned disbelief.

"Landis was so sure of himself... I don't know if Mr. Ellison told him anything of what he learned in Doc. Stoddard's office three weeks ago, but I'd guess he didn't," Blair said as the tape finished. "He thought I'd be a pushover, so he just had to gloat."

Simon glanced at Jim. "We're going to have to arrest your father – you realize that."

"Yes." There was a stunned note in Jim's voice. "He... He didn't even tell us Mom had died. We... we kept hoping that somehow she'd manage to visit us... but of course... You suspected, didn't you?" He looked at Blair.

"It seemed... possible," Blair said quietly. "I wasn't sure how we were going to prove anything, though, and if he'd just accepted what he learned about me instead of taking it – well, personally, that I could defend myself against him, his accusations, it's doubtful we'd ever have been able to prove anything.

"But now... "

"He'll be going away for a long time," Norman said. "I'll act for Blair, obviously, but I'll also act for the people we know were killed on his orders."

"Send your bill to me," Jim said quietly.

Norman shook his head. "There will be no charge," he said. "My payment in this instance will be seeing justice done. I'm sorry to say this, Jim, but it's more than time your father learned that he doesn't rule the world."

"Thanks, Norman," Blair said.

Jim took a deep breath. "I've known for a long time just how manipulative and ruthless he is. He's ruined a lot of lives. I doubt we'll get justice for most of them, either."

Simon straightened. "Right – Rafe, Brown – collect a couple of Patrol officers for backup and go and arrest William Ellison. The charge in the first instance is ordering the death of Jack Pendergrast; supplementary to that is ordering the deaths of his brother, his wife, Darren

Poynter and Blair Sandburg." He watched as the two left. "Blair, I assume you're giving us that tape as evidence?"

"Of course."

"We're lucky you had it, and had it running."

"Let's just say it's there to protect myself against a wrongful accusation by a vengeful student. Several of us have them."

"Can I get a copy?" Norman asked. "To help build the case against Ellison."

"Of course," Simon said.

"Anyway – let's just be thankful Landis had to gloat," Blair went on. "Jim – think we should go and see Monique Brackley?"

"We'll certainly have to let her know that she's lost her foreman, but we can do that by phone. I'm pretty sure from her reaction when we told her Philip's body had been found that she wasn't directly involved. Like you said, Chief, he was basically collateral damage in my father's plot against Jack."

As Jim and Blair returned to Jim's desk (Norman had stayed in Simon's office to arrange about getting the copy of the tape) Jim said, "You've been staying with Simon."

"Yes." Blair grinned. "I could have found somewhere inside that week I mentioned to you, but unless I was prepared to pay an excessive amount, it would have been pretty crappy. Simon told me straight out that he'd check any apartment I found, and he wouldn't let me move into one that wasn't a decent place to live."

"You might think he's better company, but... if you'd still like to move in with me, I can say now that you'd be very welcome."

"Thank you. And Jim – I know exactly what to say to Simon to let him understand why I'm better staying with you. You're a sentinel; I'm your guide. There's a link between us that means it's better for us to be together."

Yes. They were together now, Guide and Sentinel – as it was meant to be.



Taking the Trip

by Bluewolf

Art by Bonanza

Taking the Trip

Blair Sandburg lay without moving for a long time after he wakened, half afraid to open his eyes, his mind still numbed by the vividness of his dream.

He had been back in the warehouse, living in a corner that still had two walls and a drooping roof – just enough to give him the illusion of having shelter from the elements.

Eventually he forced his eyes open and looked round the comforting familiarity of his small room in the loft, trying to understand the reason for such an odd dream.

But he knew.

It was something left over from the day Jim threw him out of the loft, although on their return from Sierra Verde Jim had driven him straight to the motel where he had been staying, helped him pack the few things he had left there, paid the bill for him, and brought him back to the loft with the quiet comment, "This is your home, Chief, for as long as you want"; then next day had taken him to the university and without fuss collected the other boxes Blair had stacked in his office there, taking them back to the loft and unpacking them while Blair resumed his academic life. When he got home that night, it was to find all his things in their accustomed place; sensing Jim's embarrassment over his Alex-inspired actions, he simply said, "Thanks, Jim" and then dropped the subject.

But they never had really talked about what happened, and Blair was far from certain how to introduce the subject. Jim, he knew, didn't want to; not yet, anyway; and he himself? He wasn't sure just how he felt. He *wanted* to discuss it, to see how Jim felt about it all now that Alex was no longer fogging his senses, but he appreciated that Jim would find it difficult... and remembering the touch of hurt he had experienced when Jim said, 'I don't know if I'm ready to take that trip with you', at a time when it would have been natural to discuss it, he was reluctant to force the issue.

And yet...

Did his subconscious mind really believe that Jim wanted rid of him? Had he subconsciously seen things in Jim's body language that said, "Go"? Heaven knew he had seen Naomi outstay her welcome a few times when he was a child; times when he knew it was time to move on but she had apparently not seen it yet. It was interesting, though, he reflected; when that happened, after she eventually moved, Naomi had never referred to those people again, never tried to contact them again... almost as if she had been testing them and they had failed to meet whatever criteria she had been setting. But he had never consciously seen anything in Jim's behavior that said he had stayed too long until that day... and, thinking about it, Blair knew he had realized even then that Jim's body language had been at odds with his words.

All it had meant was that Jim needed elbow room, he told himself. Hell, everyone needed elbow room from time to time! He still remembered, far too vividly he sometimes thought, one day when he was barely seven, when he had felt smothered by the constant company of people and had wandered away to get some solitude. Unfortunately the commune was on the edge of desert land and, attracted by the emptiness, he had wandered into that desert, not knowing he would need water, not realizing he would need something to cover his head... By the time he realized how thirsty he was, he was already suffering from the early stages of heatstroke. Luckily it was fairly late in the day, the sun was setting and the heat dropping, but it was next morning before he was found, by which time he was also thoroughly chilled by the early-morning cold.

The incident hadn't discouraged him from exploration, but it had taught him to be careful.

He might have suspected that Jim still needed elbow room but had taken him back to the loft out of a sense of guilt, but he had been told how Jim reacted when they found him in the fountain; Simon told him, Brown told him, Megan told him – all independently of each other, and although the detail varied slightly, the one thing all three had been certain of was how utterly devastated Jim had been. It was Megan who added, "He wasn't even doing anything to try to revive you when you moved – he was just caressing your face. And Sandy, it *was* a caress. I don't think I ever saw anyone show that much love for someone, in public."

Secretly, he had treasured those words, his hurt soothed by them. So just why had he dreamed that he had not moved in with Jim, but had been forced to stay in the ruin of the burned-out warehouse?

He sighed as he switched on the light to check the time. 3.15. He'd had less than an hour of sleep – yes, just about long enough to sink into REM sleep and have a vivid dream. He was tired, too, bone-tired, but he was no longer sleepy.

With an automatic movement he reached for a book – something to occupy his mind till he felt sleepy again – then let his hand drop again without lifting it. He felt no enthusiasm at all for reading anything. He, who had absorbed books all his life, who had always loved reading, felt no enthusiasm at all for opening a book.

He was, he realized, totally stale. Meditation no longer helped him. He needed a complete break. He didn't actually *want* one, he knew, but he certainly needed one. Yet how could he have any sort of break without deserting his sentinel? Jim had learned a lot of control, but even so there was still the chance that he would zone out.

Blair sighed again, and switched off the light. Perhaps if he just lay quietly, tried to empty his mind, tried to relax, he would sleep again. But if he did, would he dream again? Would he dream again that Jim didn't want him there?

He drew a deep, shuddering breath. Perhaps... perhaps it *was* time to move on.

"Blair? Something wrong, Chief?"

"Jim! I... Sorry, man, I didn't mean to disturb you. I had a nightmare, that's all. Just a silly nightmare. Can't even remember what it was about," he added mendaciously. Jim could usually tell when he was manipulating the truth, but if his heart was already racing there wouldn't be much difference for the Sentinel to note.

"You weren't dreaming about Alex, were you?" Jim tried to prompt him.

"No. No, I don't think so." He shook his head, wondering just how much he could say. "I *think* it was an older memory – maybe even from before I knew you."

"Before...? Chief, what bad things ever happened to you before you knew me?"

Blair sighed, damning himself for that momentary slip-up – he had never confided any of the problems of his childhood to anyone – but knowing he could use this to mislead his friend. "When I was a kid – you'd be surprised. There were times we had nothing, had to sleep anywhere we could find shelter, raked through garbage hoping to find some edible scraps... not often, Naomi usually seemed to land on her feet and most of her boyfriends tried being nice to me to get her to be nice to them, if you see what I mean... and sometimes we moved into a commune for a while if she couldn't find anywhere else. I remember one winter though... I was ill, really ill, but Naomi was between boyfriends and didn't have money for a doctor and even if she had, there wasn't the money for drugs. She managed to get me south to where it was warmer, but that wasn't enough. She didn't really know where she was going, and somehow ended up on a Zuni reservation. Because I was just a kid, and ill, they gave us shelter, treated me with herbal medicine... I don't think I've ever been really warm since, though, except when I've been on an expedition in a tropical region."

"So you came to Cascade. Don't get me wrong, Chief, I'm glad you did, but couldn't you have found a university someplace warmer?"

"Yes, but not one with such a good anthropology department."

Ellison moved to the side of the bed and sank down beside his guide. "You're trying to mislead me, Blair. Trying to distract me. You've not slept well for ages, have you. Not since we got back from Sierra Verde."

"I... No, I haven't." Suddenly, he felt that he had to tell someone, reluctant though he was to inflict this on his friend. "I'm tired, Jim. Too tired to sleep. And I feel stale; I've no enthusiasm for anything any more. I've been thinking – maybe I should go to St Sebastian's for a couple of weeks – it's a completely undemanding environment, I can unwind there... "

"And then come back and inside twenty-four hours you're back to being strung as taut as an overwound watch spring? Blair, something's seriously wrong and until you resolve that, you're never going to be able to relax properly. Is... Am I the problem?"

"Not really. Well, yes, in a way I suppose you are. I mean, like, I know you couldn't help yourself the way you reacted over Alex. I can understand you trying to protect her. But it hurt when you went chasing after her, after what she did."

"I didn't want to. It was... it was like with Laura, know what I mean? Only more so. I didn't want Alex but I couldn't help myself. She was calling the shots, Chief. She knew she needed a Guide, but at the same time she didn't want to surrender what she saw as her power to a Guide's influence. She thought it would diminish her even though she knew that when you were with me, I was stronger than she would ever be. But because she knew how much I depended on you, she was acting to separate us.

"When I dreamed that I killed you, all I knew was that I had to do something to protect you – try to protect you. But I did the wrong thing. Instead of keeping you close I sent you away – left you vulnerable."

"That's a typical scenario in folk tales, you know, Jim."

"You've lost me, Chief. A typical scenario?"

"The Oracle foretells something – the person, usually a king, who asks what is in his future is told that something unpleasant will happen – he acts to prevent it and because he did – and only because he did – it does happen.

"The classic case is where a king asks for a horoscope for the son who has just been born, is told that the boy will one day kill his father, so the king sends the baby away, maybe even orders him to be killed – but the boy survives, is brought up not knowing who he is, and as an adult *does* kill his father, possibly even by accident, not knowing until too late that's what he's done. But if he'd been brought up as the prince, the situation would never have arisen."

Ellison studied his friend closely, aware of a defeated note in his voice. Usually Blair was enthusiastic when he imparted those snippets of information; but it seemed to the worried sentinel that his guide was speaking as if from habit, and he was far from sure what he could do to restore his friend's enthusiasm for life. All he knew was that he had to try, and if it meant opening himself, talking about things he normally repressed, then he would. "And that's what I did, in spades."

"But you brought me back, too, Jim. You broke the sequence because you wouldn't let me stay dead."

"Wouldn't? No, Chief. Not *wouldn't*. I... I *couldn't* let you go. I need you. I don't think I ever really *needed* anyone before. Blair, I'm no good without you. I realize that now. Before... before, I could admit to myself that you helped me, that... that without you I'd no real control, but I wouldn't admit even to myself that without you I was only half the man I could be.

"A sentinel needs his guide – his shaman. I think I knew that – but I resented it, too. Being dependant. Until I lost you.

"And Chief... In the temple. In the pool. That was how Sentinels in the past developed – expanded – their abilities. Maybe their guides went there too, once – there had to be some reason for the place having two pools, I don't think it was normal for two sentinels to go there together. I saw visions... and you were there in them every time, helping me.

"In Peru, when we went to help Simon and Darryl, I told you I didn't know how I got my powers back. Truth is, I just didn't want to speak about it. I saw the panther and an old shaman who offered me a choice. To be 'normal' or to accept the sentinel's gift. If I accepted it, went forward, I had to step over a cliff – a cliff I could see quite clearly – though it meant I would die. I chose to accept it. Of course, the cliff was metaphorical, but I made the choice to go over it.

"Then Incacha passed on the way of the shaman to you. But you never had the sort of trial that I did. You didn't even know what your spirit animal was, and it's odd that I saw it first... and killed it. I don't know... maybe I was trying to deny how much I needed you. Then you died – and that was *your* trial. Being willing to come back. But it was another trial for me, too. If I hadn't been able to bring you back, I think I would have lost my abilities again – and this time, it would have been permanent. Because I failed my guide."

Blair reached out and laid his hand on Jim's for a moment. "We both failed, man. I did try to tell you about Alex, the day I met her, and you stopped me – "

"The woman you saw at the precinct? And I said I didn't want to hear about her. You said, 'Later', but later was too late."

"Yes. But then I decided not to tell either of you about the other till I could bring you together in a controlled situation. My biggest mistake was thinking that I could help you both – but I have this *need* to help. It's built into me, like it's in my genes. But I'm *your* guide, Jim. A guide can only work properly with one sentinel, probably the one he's drawn to in the first place. He's drawn to his proper sentinel. Yes, Rainier has this great anthropology department, but I think that even at sixteen I was drawn here because you were here, even though it took me nearly ten years to find you. I spent those ten years finding out about sentinels. It was a sort of apprenticeship, I suppose. But then my trying to help another sentinel weakened our link and left us both vulnerable. If she'd been a proper sentinel, with a sentinel's instincts, it wouldn't have mattered so much – she'd have been grateful for the help, but known she still had to find her proper guide. But somehow she missed out on the instinct to protect."

"Yes. And I was on edge because I knew something was badly wrong in Cascade, and I ended up doing all the wrong things."

"Your sixth sense was being triggered."

"Guess so. Though I'm not quite sure exactly what my sixth sense is."

"We'll work it out. *Her* sixth sense had to be the ability to confuse people."

"She certainly confused me," Ellison admitted wryly.

Blair smiled – a mere shadow of his old smile, but seeing it comforted his friend. "Nothing like that will ever happen again, Jim. If another sentinel shows up, I'll tell you – and absolutely the only help I'll offer him is to advise him how to find his guide, if he doesn't already have one."

Jim smiled too. "You know, Chief, I'm surprising myself – I feel better for talking about this."

"Me, too. We've finally taken that walk, Jim. Or at least, we're taking it."

"Yes... we are, aren't we." Ellison hesitated for a moment. "Think you'll be able to sleep now?"

"I'm not sure... Jim – would you stay here tonight?"

"I could, but my bed's bigger. More comfortable. And more room to... re-establish our partnership? No – reinforce it is probably more accurate. Come upstairs?"

"Reinforce... Does that mean what I think it does?"

"It means... really relax you, in the best possible way." He pulled Blair close and closed his mouth over the slightly parted lips.

Blair yielded to his partner's coaxing tongue, opening his mouth a little more and moaning his pleasure at the gently demanding kiss. For a moment he could only submit gladly, then his male ego kicked in and he began to respond, actively caressing the invading tongue with his own.

At last they drew slightly apart. "Come upstairs?" Jim asked again.

"Try to stop me," Blair whispered. "Reinforcing our partnership sounds really good, man."

"On a regular basis?"

"As regular as you want." Blair's smile was much closer to his normal ebullient one.

"For the rest of our lives?"

"Sounds good to me, man."

Ellison stopped part-way up the stair, and turned to look down at his Guide. "I do love you, you know."

"Yes, Jim. I do know." It was true. Memory of his nightmare had already faded and he truly could no longer remember exactly what had wakened him so terrifyingly so short a time previously.

They would have problems in the future, he knew. They would certainly have to remain in the closet; cops were not exactly encouraged to act on being gay. But those were things that would have to be dealt with later, as they arose.

For now they were together, Guide and Sentinel, and together they were invincible.