

A Sense of Belonging

The Complete Collection

by katef

illustrated by PattRose

Book 1: [A Sense of Belonging](#)

A long, dark story set in a universe where Sentinels and Guides are known and valued, and Blair and Jim are not as canon. Blair is a traumatised and abused kidnap victim, and Jim is a well-respected but unbonded Sentinel Detective working undercover.

Book 2: [You Belong to Me](#)

Jim and Blair's developing partnership and their role as Cascade's new Alpha Sentinel / Guide team are explored. The story continues after Blair's release from testing at the Sentinel / Guide Department, and covers the pair's return to the Major Crimes Unit at Cascade Central Police Department.

(N.B: The Mayan fertility ritual is fictional. I have no idea if it bears any relationship to an actual ritual, Mayan or otherwise)

Book 3: [Friendship and Family Matters](#)

In the aftermath of Jim and Blair's first case as the Major Crimes Unit's resident Sentinel / Guide pair, they continue to develop both their personal and working relationships, while dealing with the reactions of friends and family members as Jim helps Blair to regain some of his former life.

Book 4: [The Birthday Party](#)

It has been a year since Blair's kidnapping by Vittorio Galbini. How are he and Jim coping with their responsibilities to each other and to their work?

Book 5: [The Prodigal Son](#)

How far would William Ellison go in order to lure Jim away from the PD?

Book 6: [The Holiday](#)

Jim and Blair take a relaxing vacation in order to repair and strengthen their bond.

Book 7: [Temporary Insanity](#)

As the anniversary of their bonding approaches, Jim and Blair's happiness is threatened by unforeseen outside influences.

Book 8: [The Water's Fine](#)

As the second anniversary of their bonding approaches, both Jim and Blair acknowledge that all is not right in their world. Can Jim come up with the means with which to heal their bond for good?



A Sense of Belonging

October 30:

Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison rubbed his hand over his face in an attempt to stave off a combination of exhaustion from long hours of surveillance and the added stress that the unceasing rigid control over his wayward senses produced. Without a bonded guide to help him with fine-tuning and support, he was finding it increasingly difficult to utilise his gift to its full extent without incipient headaches or even the occasional zone when sheer fatigue got the better of him.

Knowing that a bonded guide could be the answer to his sense problems was one thing, but actually finding and bonding with said guide for life was something he simply wasn't prepared to do. It wasn't so many years ago that the whole concept of sentinels and guides was one of suspicion and misunderstandings. Sentinels themselves were considered as either supermen or freaks, depending on one's point of view, whilst the need for guides was considered by many non-sentinels (or *mundanes*) as an excuse for some sort of legalised sex-slave, and consequently many guides were treated accordingly.

Recent years had seen a vast improvement in attitude such that Sentinels were now considered to be an asset to the community, especially in services such as the military, the police force and other law enforcement agencies, rescue services and healthcare, and their guides' supporting roles were understood to be of far greater importance than previously realised. A whole government Department for Sentinel / Guide Affairs, complete with regulatory body and specialised health care and psychological assessment had been created with a view to maximising the potential of these gifted individuals.

These developments notwithstanding, Jim still couldn't see his way to binding another person to him for the rest of his (and his guide's) natural life, so continued to ignore all attempts by the captain of his police department, Simon Banks of the Major Crimes Unit, to try to get him to attend social 'mixers' designed to pair up potential bonded partnerships.

As an ex-military officer with outstanding credentials, Jim was a very private individual who, once having joined the PD on returning to his home city of Cascade, found himself and his talents eminently suited to the type of undercover operation for which the MCU found itself particularly successful.

This latest operation, which was threatening to drive Jim to distraction, was a complicated joint operation between the MCU, Vice and the FBI in an attempt to infiltrate and eventually bring down the wide-ranging criminal network run by one Vittorio Galbini. Although superficially a highly respected member of the Cascade business community, with more than a little influence on the local political and social scenes, Jim and his colleagues knew Galbini for the ruthless and amoral low-life that he really was: one who was knee-deep in illegal drug dealing, arms smuggling and prostitution over an area stretching from Cascade to Vancouver. Only his tight control over his associates and henchmen, maintained through a combination of bribery, corruption, blackmail, and, where necessary, torture and murder, ensured the continuation of his empire thus far.

Recently, however, flaws in the security and set up of one or two of Galbini's larger deals had come to the attention of the FBI, one of whose agents had been in deep cover for several months, such that it was deemed appropriate to get the joint venture underway with a view to finally taking the evil bastard's empire down and him with it.

Thus it was that Captain Banks from MCU and Captain Sullivan from Vice, along with Special Agent Matthews from the FBI and their department colleagues had hammered out a plan to infiltrate Galbini's closest gangland associates by setting up Jim Ellison as a potential client for a large drug shipment for his carefully created fictional set up in the Seattle area.

Once inside Galbini's inner circle, Jim was to get the man's trust and collect as much information as possible in as short a time as practical to take the operation down.

This then was the reason for Jim's current tiredness. He'd been watching the comings and goings of Galbini's closest associates for days now, along with fellow detectives Rafe and H

amongst others, using his heightened senses to track and record the various negotiations with a view to obtaining the widest possible base of information before approaching his target. Once he had as much information as feasible under the circumstances, he professed himself ready to act, and began the subtle negotiations to get himself accepted as a potential business partner.

Two days later, under the guise of being introduced as a potential customer by the undercover agent, Jim found himself in the company of Galbini and a few of his closest henchmen, calmly taking the first steps in creating the fictional drug deal. The background research gathered by his colleagues and himself stood him in good stead, as did his hard-ass attitude and calculated air of menace, such that he found himself quickly in favour, so much so that he was invited to stay at Galbini's mansion in the Cascade suburbs for an evening of entertainment before closing the 'deal'.

While he was well aware of Galbini's varied criminal activities, Jim didn't possess much information regarding the gang lord's personal whims and vices, other than to know that he wasn't averse to indulging himself in the comforts available through his connections with prostitution. However, even as hardened an officer as Jim undoubtedly was, he was almost taken aback with shock when, after a gourmet dinner, complete with brandy and cigars, Jim was shown into Galbini's large and expensively furnished den to find out what the proposed evening's entertainment was to be.

Kneeling submissively on the rug in front of Galbini's sumptuous couch was one of the most beautiful boys Jim had ever seen. Very slender, with curly dark auburn hair, the boy appeared small in stature, and was virtually naked, wearing little more than a skimpy loincloth and a leather bondage-style harness complete with collar, wrist and ankle cuffs. His beautiful, but completely masculine, face was down-turned, eyes fixed on the floor at a point in front of his knees, and it didn't take sentinel senses to make out the fine tremors running through the slight frame. Although his face was unmarked, there was ample evidence of abuse, sexual and otherwise, in the many marks and fading bruises on his skin. Jim found himself at once horrified at the boy's condition, and ashamed to feel a growing arousal at the sight before him. Wrenching his gaze away from the tempting morsel, he looked at Galbini, whilst raising a quizzical eyebrow at his host, who was grinning in vicious glee at his guest's reaction.

"So, you like my pet?" he said, taking a sip of expensive brandy. "He is my favourite –; completely under my control, but I'm not averse to lending him out for the night to my chosen friends. He will do anything you want –; all I request is that he comes to no permanent harm, and that you don't mark his face. Otherwise he's yours to use for the night if you want him."

Struggling to take control of the situation in which he found himself, Jim took his time answering, giving the appearance of cold calculation, whilst fighting down a feeling of inner panic. He couldn't turn down Galbini's offer without seriously offending the man. This was obviously a sign of acceptance into the favoured inner circle, not to be passed over, but how in

god's name was he going to carry it off? Shrugging, he smirked at his host, and asked if he could retire immediately to enjoy an early night. Galbini laughed harshly, appreciating what he thought to be a man after his own heart, and waving his arm expansively, wished his guest a good night. Turning to the kneeling slave, he snapped his fingers imperiously. The boy rose gracefully to his feet and approached Jim, eyes still downcast, and held out the leash attached to his collar for Jim to take. Grasping the leather as offered, Jim nodded to his host and turned for the door with the boy following quietly behind him.

On reaching the luxurious guestroom assigned to him for the night, Jim shut the door behind them and turned to study his unwanted guest. The first thing he realised was that the boy wasn't really as young as he'd first thought, although he'd be surprised if he was much over twenty years old. Lifting the young man's chin, he was also startled by a glimpse, swiftly concealed, of the most beautiful deep blue eyes he could remember seeing –; eyes in whose depths you could lose yourself. He was also well aware that the young man was terrified, but totally compliant, so that it was obvious that he had been conditioned, most likely quite brutally, to submit to whatever was demanded of him. More surprising still was the first faint buzz of a connection between them, although Jim chose to ignore it for the time being.

"You have no reason to believe me, kiddo," he murmured, "But I have no intention of hurting you." He was pleased to be rewarded by a swift, incredulous glance from his companion, and was moved to reach out to grip the boy's shoulder. The effect was immediate and startling, as the boy fell to his knees and dropped his head onto his outstretched arms in the most submissive posture possible. "Sorry, so sorry, please, don't hurt me," came the almost silent plea, while his trembling became pronounced.

"Hey, ssh, ssh...it's OK, I'm not mad," Jim hastened to reassure him. "Look at me, kid," he commanded gently. "It really is OK, just get up for me?"

Totally obedient, the young man shot to his feet, and was surprised to be taken into Jim's arms and held gently but firmly against a strong chest. For the first time in an age he felt a measure of safety, although bitter experience prevented him from indulging in any sense of complacency. Having said that, when Jim gently wound his hand into the soft curls and raised the kid's face up, they were both startled by a second, sudden, and stronger (and entirely mutual), feeling of oneness –; a tingling sensation which seemed to spread between their close-pressed bodies.

"Oh crap," was Jim's immediate reaction, unable to ignore the evidence in front of his eyes. "You're an empath, aren't you? A guide also...! Shit! This can't be happening!"

The youngster's face crumpled in despair. "I'm so sorry –; I didn't mean to –; please forgive me –; it just happened –; please..." he babbled on. Jim's heart broke at the total defeat and terror in the kid's whole demeanour. "Hey, look, it's not as bad as you think, but this isn't the time or the place to have this discussion. I don't have anything but my word to offer you to make you believe me, but I can and will get you out of this if you want to go, but there are conditions

which I'm in no position to compromise right now. You're an empath, though, right? So you should be able to tell if I'm telling you the truth, right?"

Holding the wide-eyed gaze, he tried to project as much sincerity as he could while placing both hands on the slender shoulders. After a long moment, the boy sighed and nodded once before lowering his eyes again. Releasing the breath he hadn't even realised he was holding, Jim smiled slightly and took his hand to lead him towards the king-sized bed, where he sat himself down on the edge.

The young man stiffened briefly again, then hurried to Jim to drop down gracefully on his knees between Jim's wide-spread thighs. "I'll do anything you want, anything..." he promised.

"Because no doubt you'd be severely punished if you failed, wouldn't you?" Jim finished gently, to be answered by a tiny nod. Holding on to his outrage at the boy's treatment by the merest thread of control, Jim took stock of the situation.

No way could he fill the boy in on his plans, even if he was certain of the kid's sincerity. He was far better off not knowing anything –; what he didn't know couldn't be given up under duress. However, Jim could at least give his unsolicited companion a better night than expected.

Pulling the slender body towards him again, he nibbled the delicate skin of the elegant neck above the leather collar. Delighted to discover the two hoops piercing the left earlobe, he was nearly overwhelmed by the other's intoxicating scent, even overlaid by the sour stench of anxiety. Unable to resist the pull of his senses, he licked the tender skin behind the well-shaped ear, earning himself a tiny moan of pleasure from the boy in his arms. Forcibly wrenching his reactions under tight control, he murmured quietly into the boy's ear under the guise of seductive nuzzling. "I'm serious about not hurting you, kiddo, but I'm happy to give the impression of having a good time, as I dare say your boss isn't averse to a bit of voyeurism, eh?" He was fully aware that his senses felt sharper and more focussed than he could ever remember, so he could easily make out a couple of potential peep-holes or camera placements in the wall above the bed whilst the lack of any electrical signatures suggested that there was no audio equipment installed.

He wasn't entirely surprised by the boy's timid assent, but was more than infuriated by the further information offered. "My Master likes to watch, and lets Sean and Marco watch also. Usually when there's more than one guest to be entertained, he drugs me before they use me, so I don't remember too much, but sometimes he likes me to be aware, like tonight, and always when he gives me to Sean and Marco to play with..." and he tailed off, cheeks pinking with shame.

"Jeez, kiddo," snarled an enraged Jim, briefly forgetting for the moment that the empath probably thought he was to blame, only to hug the slender body closer. "Hush, now," he whispered, rubbing soothing circles on the shaking back. "I'm not mad at you, only at those animals." His thoughts flashed to the two goons the young man had named; recalling their

sneering arrogance and smug confidence in their boss's approval. Sean was a thickset and sandy-haired Irishman, standing around six feet tall, and heavily muscled, a scrapper; whilst Marco was of Mediterranean descent; dark and a couple of inches taller than Jim's six feet two inches. His muscles were just as noticeable, but leaner and supple, more like those of a martial arts specialist. Both looked big and mean, and Jim was certain that they were more than happy to inflict their sadistic pleasures on the boy in his arms.

Coming to a decision, Jim pushed the young man away from him a little, while placing his hands on the thin shoulders. "I'm going to the bathroom to get ready for bed, so why don't you take off that monstrosity" –; indicating the leather chest harness –; "and get yourself comfortable under the covers. I'll be back in a few, OK?" Receiving a tiny nod in response, he stood up and stepped towards the bathroom, pulling off his tie on the way. As he made his way across the floor, he caught a fleeting scent of saline before hearing the boy stripping away the hated harness. Rather than drawing attention to his companion's tears, he closed the bathroom door behind him and utilised the facilities before stripping down to his boxers.

Pausing briefly to give the young man time to get settled, he stepped from the bathroom, turning off the overhead lights as he went. Figuring that not only would the dim glow from the small night light deter the voyeurs, but would also offer some vestige of privacy to the kid, he moved towards the bed; his sentinel vision allowing him to study the worried face looking towards him from the large pillows. Guessing correctly that the boy would be unnerved by his silent approach, he whispered in reassurance. "Ssh, it's OK. I'm not going to pounce on you, Chief!" So saying, he slipped under the bedclothes to find that his companion had removed both harness and loincloth, and lay beside him wearing nothing but the collar and cuffs. Murmuring soothing nonsense words, he opened his arms to the boy, and was more than pleased when the kid scooted over to nestle against him. He settled the curly head against his shoulder, and recommenced the soothing circles over the soft skin of the bony back. Viciously curbing his desire to vent on feeling the many imperfections and scars that his sentinel touch picked up with ease, he gently turned the body in his arms so that he could straddle the slim form.

"Easy, Chief," he whispered, aware of the boy's sudden tension. "I'm just going to make this look good for the audience, OK?" So saying, he eased down to finally claim the succulent mouth offered shyly to him, to find the taste as addictive as he hoped. Gently deepening the kiss, without frightening the young man, he rolled them both over again so that the smaller body was on top.

"Still OK, Chief?" he asked, looking up into the beautiful face. The boy looked astounded, with so many emotions crossing his face. He looked nervous, hopeful, inquisitive and submissive in rapid succession.

Blair knew in his heart of hearts that he was a fool to believe in the good intentions of this stranger, but, oh, he so wished he could. He was mortified to feel his eyes filling with tears,

especially as he had become accustomed to being either punished or reviled for such shows of weakness by his Master. However, far from the expected punishment, he found himself cuddled close again, with a gentle hand around his neck pulling his face down to nuzzle into Jim's neck.

"Don't sweat it, Chief," murmured his new friend –; and, yes, he was beginning to feel that this really *could* be a friend –; "If you feel able to tell me your name, it'd be a good start. Or then, I guess you've been told not to speak it, huh?" Jim wasn't surprised to feel the slight nod in response, so he changed his line of questioning.

"Are you going to tell me how you got here, Chief?" he asked, "Or is that out of bounds too?"

Again unsurprised to feel a slight nod, he didn't push it. "It's OK, Chief, really, don't sweat it. We'll have plenty of time to catch up once you're out of here. And I DO mean to get you out of here...." He knew very well that the youngster was probably too traumatised to believe him, but he vowed to himself that he was definitely going to get his guide –; yes, HIS guide, out of this situation as soon as humanly possible.

"Get some sleep, kiddo," he whispered, kissing the top of the curly head under his chin. "I'm going to have to go tomorrow, but I *will* be back."

As Blair settled down against the muscled chest, he allowed himself for once to think back over the last few months....

Previous April:-

Blair bounced across the campus of Rainier University, having finally submitted his Master's Thesis at the tender age of twenty. He was looking forward to the Easter break, as he had worked non-stop to get his paper submitted in good time so he could have a few days of complete relaxation before preparing for the next expedition with his friend and mentor, the renowned anthropologist, Dr Eli Stoddard.

He felt as if everything was finally coming together for him, after a short lifetime of uncertainty, following his itinerant, hippy Mom from place to place around the world.

He had no idea of his father's identity, since Naomi, his Mom, insisted that she had no idea who he was. She merely declared that it mattered not, since her child was a child of the world, with no need for an acknowledged father. Because of that, Blair had done his best to fit in wherever they ended up, with whatever new 'Dad' or 'Uncle' his Mom fetched up with.

Sometimes it worked out OK, but other times weren't so good, especially when said 'Uncle' preferred the charms of the son over those of the mother. Not that he would have confessed this to Naomi. He always felt as if *he* should protect *her*, rather than the other way around.

The only constant in his life was his indubitable intelligence, and his overwhelming desire to study and acquire as much information as his inquisitive nature could absorb.

Seizing upon every book he could get his hands on, he was also drawn to observe closely every different culture with which he came into contact, such that it was no surprise that he began to long to study anthropology seriously.

Thus it was that, at the tender age of 16, he managed to persuade his mother to let him test for early entry to Rainier University in Cascade, whose anthropology programme held particular appeal for to the teen due to the presence of the famous Dr Eli Stoddard.

Testing out easily, and with all the potential of a genuine *wunderkind*, Blair was accepted by the board with open arms, and Naomi cheerfully detached from her only child, and went on her way unencumbered once again.

Enormously excited at first, Blair soon found out how hard it could be for a super-smart sixteen-year-old, who was both smaller and at least two years younger than his peers. Gradually becoming more and more disheartened, despite the glowing reports of his teachers, he was on the point of calling his Mom and giving up the struggle when he was discovered by the great man, Dr Stoddard, himself. Eli was enchanted by the youngster's charm and intelligence, and hugely flattered by the boy's hero-worship, such that he happily took Blair under his wing and encouraged the boy's growing interest in anthropology. Treating as the son Eli never had, Blair found himself supported and encouraged unstintingly, and reciprocated with all that he had.

Having come across an old monograph by Sir Richard Burton, the Victorian explorer, Blair focussed his attention on Sentinel studies, and, having raced through his undergraduate degree by the age of nineteen, he threw himself into his Master's thesis on the subject of tribal Sentinels.

On a whim, he had submitted to genetic testing to see if he possessed any Guide genes, but had yet to hear the results when the kidnapping occurred.

Crossing the parking lot on the way to his cheap digs, he was taken by surprise by a dark-coloured van with obscured windows pulling up in front of him. Idly supposing that the driver needed directions, Blair was initially unworried when the passenger door opened in front of him, only to startle in fright as heavy hands gripped his arms and a sweet-smelling cloth was clamped over his nose.

He knew nothing more until he finally woke up, head aching and nausea roiling in his belly, to find himself lying naked and bound on a cot in a small, virtually unfurnished room. Hell for Blair had started right then.

As time went on, he began to understand that he had been targeted by a crime lord who had seen him working in a bar during one of his part-time jobs intended to supplement his student

grants. This crime lord, Galbini, had obsessed on the beautiful bartender, to the extent that he had looked into the young man's background and had discovered that, despite his academic achievements, the boy actually had no family ties *per se* except for some ditzy, absentee Mom, so he was unlikely to be missed any time soon.

A brutal training regime commenced, which stripped Blair of all he had been, and reduced him to a compliant, nameless sex-slave totally under Galbini's domination. Not even allowed the freedom to end his own life, Blair was tended to by one of Galbini's goons, his many injuries treated by Galbini's tame Doctor, and lent out to any and every potential business client Galbini wished to impress.

He had undergone every form of abuse his 'clients' wished to perform on him, the only restrictions being that Galbini refused to let them mark his face, and they were not allowed to permanently damage him, otherwise, anything went.

Frequently dosed with 'Roofies' (the date-rape drug, Rohypnol) when appropriate, at least on those occasions Blair was mercifully unaware of the abuse until the following morning, when he awoke to the ministrations of Galbini's doctor.

Occasionally, though, when he was being played with by Galbini himself or his particular favourites, like Sean and Marco, he was kept awake and aware of every hurt and depraved act.

No longer aware of the passage of time, only existing from day to day, Blair had become totally subservient and controlled to the point of denying his own name, until, this evening; a man had arrived who seemed to be the answer to each and every one of Blair's prayers.

The following morning Jim awoke early, having passed a disturbed and watchful night. He had seen, as expected, the careful cracking open of the door, and the silent and gloating gaze of both Galbini and Sean. Pretending to be asleep, Jim kept the covers tucked high over the shoulders of the sleeping boy. He had no intention of letting their lecherous glances sweep over his soon-to-be Guide, even though he was unhappily aware that he wouldn't be able to take the kid with him when he left in the morning.

It would be up to him to get the operation up and running as soon as possible so he could get back to collect his Guide.

As he slipped out of bed to use the bathroom, he was just stepping into the shower when he heard the slight disturbance caused by the boy being unceremoniously dragged out of bed by his keeper.

Jim exited the bathroom to see the boy, leashed once again, led from the room without a backward glance. Once again adopting his submissive demeanour, the young man didn't dare

look back. It had been a wonderful interlude –; one to treasure in the coming months until he either succeeded in killing himself, or some overly-aggressive ‘client’ did it for him.

Forcing himself not to react out of character for his adopted *persona*, Jim quietly returned to the bathroom to finish his ablutions, and dressed for the day while extending his hearing as far as he could to monitor the heartbeat of his designated Guide.

A couple of hours later he left Galbini’s mansion following a sumptuous breakfast (which almost choked him), with declarations of friendship and gestures of bonhomie on all sides.

Sauntering to his rented SUV, Jim wryly congratulated himself on his icy control, when all he wanted to do was run back inside the mansion, gun blazing, to seize and rescue his Guide.

A little later still, having ensured he hadn’t been followed, he was back at the PD running through all that had happened during his stay at the mansion (but omitting the details of the night spent with his guide-to-be).

It was decided that he should follow through with the planned meet with Galbini’s team, set for that afternoon at an isolated warehouse, so that the arrest could go down with all sides taken *in flagrante*.

As it happened, the take-down went far more smoothly than Jim and the rest of MCU could have foreseen, thanks to the minute detail provided by the inside men. Special Agent Matthews and Captains Banks and Sullivan would be more than content to relay to the Chief of Police and the powers-that-be that there were more than a few of Galbini’s inner circle rounded up at the bust, including his ‘money man’, who had been along for the negotiations. Added to that another couple of minor gang lords and the representatives of at least two other major crime families, and the operation could be considered to be a complete success, especially with no casualties to the ‘good guys’.

It was only when the perps were being cuffed and loaded into the vans that Jim realised that, not only was Galbini not present, but neither were his favourite bodyguards, Sean and Marco.

Suddenly concerned, Jim called to his Captain. “Simon, there are some missing faces here. I’m surprised that Galbini didn’t show in person, and his closest bodyguards are missing too. I need to go back to his place, now!”

Unaware of the real reason for his subordinate’s concern, Banks wasn’t particularly inclined to be cooperative, but in view of Jim’s contribution to a hugely successful bust, he was prepared to cut his best detective some slack. So saying, he hurried to his sedan with Jim hot on his heels, and, calling over his shoulder to the rest of his team to follow as soon as possible, he peeled out of the yard and headed for Galbini’s mansion.

On arrival at the gates, Jim hurriedly identified himself to the voice activated security system under his assumed alias, and Simon drove carefully up to the front doors, trying to avoid suspicion until the last moment.

Once there, both men climbed out of the car, and, swiftly taking charge of the situation, Jim extended his hearing to locate the already-loved heartbeat of his new Guide. Locating it with those of at least two others in the direction of Galbini's den, he was concerned to hear that the Guide's heartbeat was rapid and accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of panic and pain.

"This way," he snapped to his Captain, and took off without waiting for a response. Seeing that there didn't appear to be any particular opposition in the immediate area, Simon followed the detective to the ornate doors of what was apparently Galbini's inner sanctum.

The tableau that greeted them seemed to be frozen for a few vital seconds before all hell broke loose.

Jim saw his Guide, dressed like a party boy in skin-tight leather pants and cropped sleeveless tee, gripped tightly by his upper arms by Marco, who was holding him still for Sean to grope at will. Galbini, cigar in hand and a predatory smirk on his face, looked on approvingly at the boy's distress. New marks and bites visible on the kid's arms and torso suggested to Jim that he had been given to the goons to play with after Jim had left, probably to make up for the lack of action in the bedroom last night.

Even as these thoughts crossed his mind, the men in the room became aware of the cops' presence and sprang into action. Sean, turning to face the pair whilst reaching for the gun in his shoulder holster, refused to comply with Jim's, "Freeze, Cascade Police!" and paid the price with a bullet through the heart.

Seeing his colleague slump to the floor with blood already soaking his chest, Marco took the sensible route, and raised both hands in surrender.

Galbini, however, had no such intention, and swiftly grabbed his toy to him.

Holding Blair tightly to his chest, he ground the barrel of a 9mm pistol against the delicate skin of the boy's temple. "Drop the guns or he dies!" he snarled, and the two cops had no trouble believing in his complete sincerity. Jim glanced into the boy's face, and automatically catalogued the expression of pain and eyes wide with a world of fear and hurt. Biting his full bottom lip in an effort not to cry out, Blair begged silently for rescue.

Dragging his captive slowly backwards with him, Galbini repeated his threat, growing more impatient at Jim's lack of cooperation. Suddenly, Blair abruptly decided that he was totally unable to permit his Sentinel to be hurt because of him, so, with a look of resignation crossing his face, he glanced apologetically at Jim before going completely limp in Galbini's arms. Distracted by the sudden dead weight unbalancing him, Galbini was left momentarily open to

Jim's shot, which he took with sentinel precision, drilling Galbini cleanly through the left eye. The crime lord dropped without a further sound, taking Blair down with him.

Swiftly covering the few yards between them, Jim kicked the gun away from the lifeless hand, and dropped to a crouch beside his Guide.

Blair seemed to take a few moments to realise that he was still alive and freed from his ex Master's grip. When the truth dawned, Jim could easily read the expression of shock and reaction that crossed the youthful face as the trembling started, and the boy launched himself into his Sentinel's open arms.

Clinging like a limpet to Jim's shirt, and burying his face against the broad chest, he gave himself up to the hysterical tears clamouring to escape and sobbed uncontrollably for many minutes while Simon looked on in disgust, having cuffed Marco and handed him over to the newly-arrived backup.

Eventually, Simon spoke to his best detective.

"Come on now, Jim. It's time to hand him over for processing and printing...." He got no further, and was taken aback with Jim's snarled response. "Mine! My Guide! No one touches him without my say-so! He's a victim, not one of them, and he goes with me!"

'Oh, holy crap!' thought Simon. This situation had the makings of his worst nightmare. Having denied the necessity of taking a guide for so long, his best detective appeared to have fully imprinted on possibly the most unsuitable candidate in Simon's view. He gritted his teeth, unsuccessfully trying to wipe the disbelief and disgust from his face as he watched the big cop cuddling the sobbing, slutty boytoy to his chest.

From day one on the job, Jim had proved to be a taciturn, hard-assed loner, whose attitude was tolerated mainly because of his dedication to duty and his impressive arrest and closure rate. Unwilling to put up with support from temporary guides unless in extreme circumstances, it seemed that he was now completely fixated on the scrap of humanity in his arms. The situation, in Simon's opinion, couldn't really get much worse, but, if the new bond was as strong as it appeared to be, he feared that he had little chance of prying the two apart.

Taking several deep breaths to calm himself down, Simon addressed the semi-feral sentinel in his most conciliatory tone, suggesting that he take the kid to get checked out at the hospital, then bring him back to the PD to take his statement for the wrap-up. Already anticipating Jim's refusal, he hurriedly added that it would be a good thing to get the boy's prints and photo so they could be run through 'Missing Persons' if the traumatised youngster was unable to provide his name and history right now.

Seeing the sense of this argument, Jim nodded once, and, gathering the slight figure to him, he left the room, oblivious of the questioning glances from the other police personnel who had arrived in the aftermath of the shooting.

Tucking the trembling and silent young man close to his side, Jim commandeered one of the squad cars to give them a ride to the Sentinel / Guide unit at Cascade General, where he knew that his new Guide would get checked out with the least amount of additional trauma.

During the ride to the hospital, Jim ignored the glances of the uniforms in front, and concentrated on sending calming and supportive thoughts to the kid tucked into his side. The boy had yet to speak a word, only responding to Jim's gentle enquiries regarding his condition with small nods and shakes of his head when appropriate.

Now apparently free from Galbini's clutches, Blair was unable as yet to fully grasp his new situation. He understood that the big man beside him was apparently a detective at the PD, not one of Galbini's criminal acquaintances as he had first believed.

What he also understood deep in the very core of his being, was that this man was his Sentinel, and that he had already been imprinted and claimed as Guide.

However, what should have been one of the most glorious moments of his young life had been rendered virtually worthless. How could any Sentinel, let alone a police detective, have any need for a crime lord's abused ex-sex slave? His always low self-esteem was now non-existent, and he was sure that, once given the opportunity to consider the true extent of his folly, the Sentinel would abandon him to a life of drug-controlled empathic misery.

Lost in his thoughts, he was startled when Jim shook him slightly to warn him of their arrival at the hospital.

On entering, the staff, well used to dealing with over-protective sentinels, gently took the pair to an examination room, where a sympathetic elderly doctor waited to check Blair over.

Knowing full well that there was no point in even suggesting that Jim wait outside, the grey-haired, kindly-looking man introduced himself to the pair.

"I'm Dr Stevens," he said gently. "May I look at you, son?" This question was directed as much to Jim as to the Guide as part of accepted Sentinel / Guide protocol.

Receiving a nod of consent from Jim, he approached the young Guide, whose pale face had suddenly flushed with embarrassment and shame.

It was more than obvious what type of injuries the doctor was going to encounter as the young man peeled off his tight clothing with the help of his Sentinel, but Dr Stevens was no innocent when coming face-to-face with all types of situations, so he was able to address the boy calmly.

Once all his clothes were removed, including the ever present collar and cuffs, Jim was enraged to see that, not only were the boy's torso and buttocks covered with new marks and bruises, but Galbini had had the boy's neck, wrists and ankles tattooed with chains, so that, even without the leather coverings, his status as 'slave' would be plain for all to see.

Knowing that his new Guide was fully aware of his anger, Jim fought to control his disgust in an effort to comfort the boy, who was hunched in on himself in shame.

Watching the pair shrewdly, the doctor was astonished to see the depth of connection between them, although he had already been made aware that they hadn't even fully bonded yet in the full sexual act. The sheer strength of the nascent bond already outmatched many a fully bonded pair, so Stevens was fairly certain he was watching an alpha pairing in the making. Such a pity that the young Guide was in such poor shape physically, and surely emotionally also.

Shaking himself, he gently moved to examine the boy, and was not surprised when the big detective made it plain he was staying in the room.

After a full examination, including the unpleasant intimate rectal probe, which the doctor did his best to make as quick and the least traumatic possible, he encouraged the young Guide to sit up and dress in the scrubs and paper shoes which the Sentinel had commandeered since the obnoxious leather clothes had already been bagged for transport to the PD's forensics lab for trace evidence against Marco and the deceased Sean and Galbini.

He then suggested that Blair lie down for a few minutes to try to relax a little while he quietly pulled Jim aside for a consultation.

He was well aware that the Sentinel had already scanned the Guide, and was probably at least as aware of the boy's injuries as the doctor himself, but Stevens wanted to catalogue the list fully anyway so that there would be no misunderstanding as to the severity of his patient's condition.

Beginning with the numerous welts and bruises, he confirmed that there had been many savage beatings, with newer bruises overlaying the old, but none severe enough to be life-threatening; rather intended to inflict the maximum pain for the minimum damage. The nipples were raw and bruised from rough pinching and biting. Nevertheless, the boy had obviously had reasonably adequate medical treatment after these episodes, and had also received sufficient sustenance to keep him fairly healthy, if conspicuously underweight and somewhat dehydrated.

However, in terms of the rectal exam, it was obvious that Blair had been roughly and frequently penetrated over a lengthy period, and was in some considerable discomfort from the barely healed tears and bruising. Again, he had been patched up to some extent, but the scarring would cause discomfort for some time to come, even when allowed to heal completely. Dr Stevens finished by saying that he had taken blood samples whilst completing the rape kit, and would send them off immediately to the lab to check for STDs or AIDs. All that was left to do was to give Jim the prescription to fill for oral antibiotics and painkillers, and a soothing antiseptic cream for the tender nipples and rectal area. Finally he suggested that Jim try to get the Guide to eat something light before taking him back to the PD for his statement.

Jim listened to the doctor's advice with a commendable amount of attention, whilst keeping his senses firmly anchored on his Guide. As soon as he heard sounds of small movement coming from the cubicle, he left the doctor's side and strode to where the young man in question was twisting around on the gurney, muttering under his breath in obvious distress.

"Hey, Chief," he said softly, gently holding the shaking shoulders in an attempt to wake the boy without startling him. Blair shot up with a gasp, momentarily disorientated, then his wildly darting gaze fixed on Jim's eyes, and he relaxed a little, much to Jim's satisfaction.

"Time to get back to the PD," Jim murmured. "But we'll get a snack on the way 'cos I can hear your stomach rumbling from here even without sentinel senses," he added with what he hoped was an encouraging smile. The youngster offered a tiny grin in return before ducking his head again, almost as if afraid of having responded in such a way. Choosing for now not to make an issue of his Guide's reaction, Jim took his arm and helped him down off the gurney, keeping hold of his shoulders for a moment or two while Blair found his balance.

Thanking the doctor, who was still waiting outside the cubicle, for his gentleness in treating his Guide, Jim steered his charge towards the pharmacy to pick up the meds before heading back the PD.

Remembering that he had arrived in a squad car, he decided there was no hurry, so after picking up the prescription, he tucked Blair into his side again and headed for the cafeteria. On arrival, Jim sat him in a quiet corner while he purchased some decent-looking chicken soup and a couple of sandwiches along with orange juice for Blair and coffee for himself. Seeing that the young man was drooping with fatigue, he gently encouraged him to eat at least a few bites of the soup and drink the juice, and finished his own food as quickly as possible.

Knowing he could put it off no longer, he helped Blair to his feet again, and almost carried him out to the exit where he hailed a cab to take them back downtown.

As they waited to enter the cab, Jim noticed that, despite the relatively mild day in Cascade terms, the boy was shivering continuously. Deciding that he was probably suffering from a combination of nerves, fatigue and low blood sugar, as well as discomfort over the scanty cover provided by the hospital scrubs, Jim slipped out of his jacket and encouraged him to put it on.

Blair shivered again, this time in delight, as he snuggled into the cosy material, still warm from Jim's body. This time, as he dozed off in the back of the cab, he could almost imagine himself wrapped in his Sentinel's arms, warm and secure, just like last night before he had been dragged away again in the early morning and given to Sean and Marco to play with.

Forcibly trying to concentrate his mind on the positive, he recalled how Jim had come back for him, just as he'd promised, and had taken down Galbini and Sean to save him. Now all he had to do was be as good as he could be to prove himself worthy of being chosen as Guide to such an amazing man. Burying his face in Jim's sleeve, he settled down to try and catch a nap,

basking in the comfort of his growing love for his Sentinel, augmented by a hefty dose of hero-worship.

Jim smiled at the small figure pressed up close to his side, pleased at this proof that the youngster was beginning to trust him, despite his awful recent past. Jim was determined to find out as much as he could about him in as short a time as possible in order to start cementing their partnership. Although he didn't even know his Guide's name yet, Jim was determined that he would come to live with him at his loft apartment where he would be protected and cherished, and he would do his level best to help him get back as much as he realistically could of the engaging young man Jim was sure he must have been before his kidnapping.

Settling back in his seat for the short drive, Jim closed his eyes for a few minutes' relaxation before taking the next step in their partnership.

On arrival at the PD, Jim shook his Guide gently awake and helped him out of the cab, totally oblivious of the strange look he was getting from the driver. Handing over the fare, plus a good tip, he tucked his Guide under his arm again in a gesture which was already feeling familiar and comfortable to them both.

He was aware of Blair's increasing nervousness as they reached the elevator, and when they were joined by a couple of uniforms, Blair couldn't stop himself from grasping a fistful of Jim's shirt, while hiding his face against his Sentinel's sleeve. A deep growl and intimidating glare from Jim prevented the uniforms from making any untoward comments or approaches to his new Guide, and when they reached the sixth floor he pushed Blair in front of him towards the MCU bullpen.

On opening the door, the immediate hush and the curious attention centred on the new arrivals by the rest of the officers had Blair stopping dead in his tracks, and whipping round, looking for the nearest escape as his fight or flight reflex kicked in. Reacting even faster, Jim grabbed his fleeing Guide, and reeled him back in, pulling the young man to his chest and tucking the shaking Guide's face into his shoulder.

Taking the hint, the more sensitive of his colleagues turned their attention elsewhere in an effort to relieve the tension and offer a little privacy, although others smirked in ill-concealed glee at the sight of the 'Hard-ass Ellison' cuddling his Guide like a baby.

Snarling in irritation, Jim headed for his desk, where he pushed Blair gently into an empty seat by the wall, keeping the smaller figure protectively behind him, and placing himself between his Guide and the rest of the bullpen.

After a short pause, a large African American detective with a friendly face approached the pair, hands held out unthreateningly.

"Hey, Jim." Captain Joel Taggert, erstwhile leader of the Bomb Squad hitched his hip on the edge of Jim's desk, although he made no overt move towards the young man trying to make himself one with the wall behind him. "Just wanted to introduce myself to your new Guide, and to say how glad I am that you've found each other at last." Joel's cousin had been a Sentinel, but, never having found his Guide, and refusing medication to ease his pain when his senses eventually went out of control, the man had killed himself rather than exist without a companion. Joel was a good man, and his congratulations were sincere, as was the welcome he extended towards the newcomer.

Tamping down his instinctive urge to get up in Joel's face, Jim the Sentinel forced himself to bring his rational self to the fore, in view of his genuine liking for the man, and the knowledge that Joel would never pose a threat to a fragile youngster such as Blair.

Extending a hand backwards to his Guide, Jim urged him forward away from the wall. Easing Blair up to his side he gently introduced the Captain as a good friend and colleague. Jim's easy acceptance convinced Blair of the man's trustworthiness, so he smiled shyly, after glancing sideways at his Sentinel to make sure he was interpreting the situation correctly.

Joel was overjoyed with the response, as was Jim himself, especially in view of the Guide's previous reaction on entering the bullpen. When Joel extended his hand in greeting, Blair gazed at it for a moment then looked up to see his Sentinel's approving nod. Swallowing hard, he extended his own smaller hand, which shook visibly, and briefly squeezed Joel's large paw before withdrawing quickly and stepping behind Jim's broad back. Jim and Joel exchanged knowing glances, both understanding the significance behind the small gesture in re-establishing the Guide's sense of self-esteem.

Unfortunately, the effect was negated almost immediately when a loud voice bellowed forth from Captain Banks' office. "Ellison, my office, now! And bring the kid with you!"

Blair shot backwards in fright, collided with the wall and hunkered down, folding his arms over his head. Glaring furiously at his Captain, Jim knelt in front of the shaking figure, while Joel walked up to Simon, his normally genial face scowling in displeasure. "For God's sake, Simon, can't you cut them a little slack? You *know* what that boy's been through, and whether you like it or not, he's well on his way to being Jim's bonded Guide. The Sentinel Director himself told me just now that even at this early stage it would probably be impossible to part them without some serious psychological damage to them both. You'll just have to live with it if you want to keep Detective Ellison in the department."

"Don't lecture me, Joel," Simon snarled at his friend. "The way I feel at the moment, I may well prefer *not* to have Ellison on my team if it also means putting up with that little hippy freak pretty boy--"

"Simon!" Joel responded in shock. "You can't mean that! I've known you for years, and I simply don't believe you can be so intolerant!"

Simon had the grace to look uncomfortable, but didn't change his tone, except to quieten it down a little.

"When you're quite ready, Detective..." he said, turning away to go back into his office.

"You may as well come in too, Joel," he added, somewhat ungraciously. "Especially as everyone will have to be brought up to speed sooner or later."

Joel turned back to face Ellison and the boy, to see that Jim had succeeded in pulling Blair back to his feet. He was murmuring something comforting to the Guide, who had begun to relax somewhat, although still holding tightly on to Jim's shirt.

Nodding to Joel, Jim tucked Blair into his side as was becoming the norm with them, and headed towards the Captain's office.

Conversation, which had paused yet again during the latest incident, resumed as the office door closed. Jim tried hard not to eavesdrop on his colleagues, but couldn't help but listen in. He was surprised to find that, although there were one or two unpleasant remarks regarding fucktoys and cheap sluts, most of the comments were sympathetic and supportive.

Turning his attention back to his Captain, he settled his Guide on one of the chairs in front of the desk, ignoring the brief grimace of distaste from Simon. He glanced up when two others knocked and entered, noting his colleagues and fellow detectives Brian Rafe and Henri (H) Brown. Rafe, dapper and slim, and his cheerful, round-faced African American partner nodded their greeting to Jim and looked inquisitively at the small figure at his side.

"Hey Jim," the ebullient H addressed him breezily. "Ready to find out a bit about your new Guide? We've been looking up his details in Missing Persons."

"S'OK, kid," he added, addressing Blair directly in spite of Jim's affronted frown. "There's nothing there you should be afraid of," and he grinned guilelessly, not noticing at first how the youngster was reacting.

Sitting up sharply, Jim nodded his agreement, as eager as any of them to finally hear some of the details his Guide had been too traumatised to reveal up until now, when he suddenly became aware of the kid's gasping breaths as he worked his way towards a full-blown panic attack.

"No, Chief, not now!" he grated out, gripping both his Guide's wrists with bruising strength.

The sharp pain pulled Blair back from the edge, and he nodded hurriedly, babbling, "S...s...sorry! 'M sorry! Please don't reject me, please! I'll be good, I swear...!"

"Easy, Chief. It's OK. I know, it's just been too much for you in one day, hasn't it, baby? Ssh now, OK?"

Disregarding the astounded expressions on his colleagues' faces, Jim was relieved when the young man nodded again, and sat back down, dropping his gaze to the floor in embarrassment.

"Go on, H. It's OK," said Jim, jumping in ahead of Simon, who was spluttering in irritation.

"Sure thing, Jim, Captain," H replied, perching a hip on Simon's conference table, and opening the slender file in his hands.

"Your man here is called Blair Sandburg. He's a grad student from Rainier, and a smart one at that. He started there at age sixteen, graduated at the tender age of nineteen, and completed his Masters in Sentinel Studies this April, just before his twenty-first birthday. He was reported missing by a Dr Eli Stoddard a week or so after he handed in his Thesis when he didn't show at the defence. He's been missing ever since. It would appear from the testimony of that goon of Galbini's, Marco Rosa, that Galbini had become obsessed with the kid, so had him picked up straight off the campus. That's all the info we have until he re-surfaced during Jim's undercover job." H finished his report, looking down at Blair's bowed head, unmistakable compassion in his eyes.

Blair had hunched in on himself, unable to respond until he could get his head round the few baldly-stated phrases that summed up nearly seven months of sheer hell. He wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all; tell them all about the torture, the brain-washing, and the unending sexual abuse, but had no energy, no will left right now. He just wished to be left in peace, to be allowed to meditate in an effort to come to terms with the trauma of his captivity, but there was no way that was going to happen. Not only was he going to have to make some sort of statement to the authorities, he now had to learn to accommodate a new Sentinel before he had even come to terms with his own newly-awakened empathy. It was all too much, and gripping his head between clenched fists, he rocked backwards and forwards in distress for a few seconds before slumping senseless towards the floor, unaware of his Sentinel's swift move to catch him before he hit the ground.

"OK, that's it," growled Jim with finality. "He's had more than enough...I'm taking him back to the loft. Sorry, Simon, but you'll have to tell everyone that they'll have to wait for my Guide's testimony until he's had a chance to get some rest."

So saying, he scooped up the slender figure, and marched towards the elevators with Joel running interference, and completely ignoring his Captain's bellowed command for him to return at once.

Guessing that Jim wouldn't have his truck at the PD, Joel quietly offered to drive the pair back to the loft, and was relieved when Ellison nodded and murmured his agreement. So saying, the three of them descended to the parking garage, where Jim continued to completely ignore the curious stares from the various other cops wandering through the area, no doubt intrigued to see Detective 'Asshole' Ellison cradling some kid like a small child. Jim pondered briefly that, although he was hefting his precious bundle with apparent ease, the Guide was no lightweight

despite his half-starved condition, so he had the potential to develop into a sturdy, compact man.

When Joel opened the car door for them, he wasn't surprised when, after settling the still-unconscious Guide into the back seat, Jim climbed in after him to sit with the boy's head resting on his lap. Understanding that it was not the time to be attempting small-talk, Joel simply pulled out of the garage and headed out to the loft at 852 Prospect.

During the drive, Joel glanced in the rear view mirror at the pair several times to check on their progress, and was charmed to see that Jim was carding his hand gently through the boy's soft curls, apparently both giving and receiving comfort. He also noted that his friend's normally stern face had taken on a faintly bemused look, and wore a gentle smile as he gazed down at the sleeping face in his lap. Joel swallowed a small lump in his throat as he contemplated the fortuitous circumstances which had brought the two together. He considered that, by the looks of the young man, he was desperately in need of some TLC and protection, whilst providing the same could be just what Jim Ellison needed to fully integrate his sentinel senses and re-enter the human race after maintaining a rigid aloofness for so long.

On arriving at Prospect, Joel pulled into the nearest parking bay to the entrance to 852, and opened the door for his passengers. Offering to give Jim a helping hand, he wasn't really surprised when the big man scooped the smaller body up into his arms again, and, with a nod of thanks to Joel, he strode towards the building. Joel didn't hesitate, but preceded the pair to open the entrance door for them, then pressed the call button for the ancient elevator to take them up to the 3rd floor. Once inside, Joel took the keys for #307 from Jim's hand, and opened the apartment door for them.

Jim immediately laid his burden down on the couch, and covered him with the afghan from over the back. Turning to Joel, he thanked the man for his help and support, but turned down the offer of further assistance.

"Thanks for everything, Joel, but we'll be OK for now. I doubt we'll be in the office for a couple of days. Blair's going to need some proper down-time, and I'm not sure how we stand as regards bonding leave yet. I guess Simon's not going to be happy with us, but it's too bad. The kid's running on empty, and his head must be a terrifying place right now," he added, glancing fondly at the sleeping face.

"I understand, Jim," replied Joel. "Don't worry about Simon for now; just concentrate on your Guide. For what it's worth, I think you've dropped lucky whatever anyone else may say. I'm positive that he's a good person, even after such a short acquaintance, and he'll be good for you. Hell! You're the best thing that could have happened to him, too!"

"I'm not so sure, Joel, although I appreciate your confidence. It's not that I could care about anyone else's opinions about Blair's ability as my guide, but I'm not sure that I'm the best thing

for him. For all I know, he may not even have wanted to *be* a guide if his life had continued as normal without that bastard kidnapping him!"

"That's as may be, Jim," replied Joel, laying a friendly hand on the Sentinel's shoulder. "But the fact remains that Galbini *did* kidnap and torture him, and you *did* come to his rescue, so who's to argue with the hands you've both been dealt? For all you know, this could have been meant to happen, if you believe in Destiny!"

With a short bark of laughter, Jim replied, "Thanks, Joel. Even if you're talking out your ass, you always sound convincing. I'll choose to believe that you're right. It's good to know at least one person is going to cut us some slack."

Sobering, Joel murmured, "I think you'll find there's a lot more support out there than you think, if you give it a chance. Don't sell yourself, or your Guide, short, OK? Anyway, I'll get back to the PD and start pouring oil on Simon's troubled waters, if you know what I mean..."

So saying, he made his way to the door, and left the loft with a wave to Jim and a brief smile and fond glance at the sleeping figure on the couch.

Thanking the powers that be for good people like Joel Taggert, Jim returned to the couch and sat down on the small chair opposite so he could contemplate his new Guide.

Thinking that he ought to take Blair up to bed, he changed his mind the next instant when he realised how bewildered the young man was going to be to find himself in yet another new situation. The last thing he was going to need right now was to find himself in another new bed with all the connotations that such a location would provoke in his traumatised mind.

No, he decided that he would wait until his Guide woke naturally, then he would feed and clean him up before taking him to bed (and he *would* take him to bed), only there would be no forcing of the sexual bond until the Guide was good and ready.

In the meantime, he kept himself busy getting out the fixings for a light supper, and sorting out a few garments Blair could wear until they could get something new for him. After sorting out some smallish boxers, a tee shirt, warm socks and a pair of sweats that had shrunk in the wash, Jim checked once again on his charge, only to find that he was still deeply asleep. Realising that Blair must be way more exhausted than he had supposed, Jim left him in peace again, having made the decision that now would be a good time to try and contact that Dr Stoddard who seemed to be the only person other than Blair himself who could provide some background.

Making up his mind, Jim dialled the number for Rainier University, and asked to be connected to Dr Eli Stoddard in the Anthropology Department. Half expecting to be given the brush-off, or to be told that the Professor was out of the country on another field trip, he was pleasantly surprised to be put straight through. The voice answering the phone was a light tenor, youthful sounding, even though Jim was pretty sure the man must be at least entering his early middle age. Introducing himself as Detective Ellison, Major Crimes, he got no further before the voice

cut in immediately. "Is this about Blair? Have you found him? Is he all right? It's been so long, I was beginning to despair--"

"Hold on please, sir, just a minute and I'll explain," Jim interrupted the flow of words.

"Yes, we have found Blair Sandburg, but I need to find out something about him. He's had a pretty rough time, and I'd like to get as much information about him as possible so I can help him--"

"What do you mean, Detective?" Stoddard interjected worriedly. "Why can't he come back here to the University? He has friends here, and I've kept all his things --; boxed them up and kept them in my garage until he came back to claim them. He has a place on the Doctoral programme which he can still take up if he gets back here soon--"

"Whoa, there, Professor!" and it was Jim's turn to cut in again. "Look, I can't tell you how glad I am that there's someone out there who still cares about Blair, but I have to explain the situation to you. It's much more complicated than simply finding a missing student."

"Yes, yes, I understand," replied Stoddard with a sigh. "I *do* understand, Detective, and I promise to listen to everything you have to tell me. It's just that I'm very fond of that boy. He's like the son I never had --; incredibly smart --; he started here at 16, you know --; and so full of enthusiasm for anthropology, well, any subject really --; and he absorbs information like a sponge --; amazing recall too, and bounce! He can talk a mile a minute...!"

"Oh! I'm sorry, Detective Ellison. I'm running off again aren't I?"

Despite his impatience, Jim couldn't help but smile to himself at the man's enthusiasm for his Guide. There was obviously a lot of mutual regard and affection between the two. It was a great shame that he was about to ruin the picture Stoddard held for his missing protégé.

"Actually, Dr Stoddard, I'm sorry to have to tell you that Blair isn't as you remember him. He was kidnapped off campus, as you already know, but he was held by a criminal low-life for nearly seven months until I found him two days ago." (Two days? Was that all?) Shaking his head and getting himself mentally back on track, Jim continued.

"Anyway, he was treated extremely badly --; I don't think you need to know too much detail at this point --; but, suffice it to say he's really traumatised. He's staying with me now, and I need to know as much as you can tell me so I can help him to get back some sense of self."

"How do you mean, staying with you?" Stoddard asked sharply. "Why can't he come to me? I can help him reintegrate into the doctoral programme and his research--"

"No, Professor," Jim cut him off again with no little impatience this time. "It's not going to be as easy as that. I don't know if Blair ever got tested for the guide gene, but that's what he is and, well, we sort of imprinted when I found him. He's my Guide."

The sense of shock emanating from Stoddard via the phone connection was almost palpable, and Jim braced himself for what he expected to be a shout of denial. What came instead was a whispered, "Oh! Oh Blair, my dear boy. What have you done now?" then, a little louder, "Look, Detective, thank you for telling me this, and letting me know that Blair is alive at least. I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to go away now and 'get my head round this' as Blair would say. I'll be in touch again shortly if you'll leave your number...perhaps I could come and visit him soon?"

"Sure, Professor," replied Jim affably. "My number is 555 6453. We live at #307, 852 Prospect, if you'd like to call by, but please be aware he won't seem the same, for a while at least."

"I understand, and thank you, Detective Ellison. I'll be in touch," and with that the connection was broken.

Looking distractedly at the handset clutched in his fist, Jim sat for a moment before replacing it in its cradle. He had a lot to think about, and he knew that how he decided to proceed from now on would have a lasting effect on them both. Knowing full well that he wasn't the most patient person in the world, nonetheless he was going to have to learn to be calm and supportive whenever humanly possible if his Guide was ever to realise some of his potential. He just hoped he was going to be up to the task.

Heaving a sigh, he returned to the kitchen to continue his preparations for a simple stir fry when he heard slight movements from the couch, and registered the increased heart rate which preceded his Guide's return to wakefulness. Abandoning the knife and chopping board he hurried over to crouch in front of his new roommate so the first thing Blair would see on opening his eyes would be a familiar face.

"Hey there, you're up!" he murmured with a smile, and was enchanted by the boy's reaction. Far from the expected startle, Blair offered a small smile and reached out sleepily to touch Jim's cheek, which he stroked gently for a second. However, the precious moment of serenity dissolved an instant later when reality kicked in, and the young man visibly reconnected with his fears. Shocked at his audacity, Blair pushed himself back against the couch cushions, half expecting a blow or harsh words at the very least. He was more than surprised when all he received was an encouraging smile from the man before him, and waves of comfort and support flowed into his mind. A tiny voice, ruthlessly suppressed until now, awoke in his brain, whispering that perhaps there really was hope, and that this Sentinel really could be his saviour. It was up to Blair himself to nurture his trust and belief in his new companion, and, for a wondrous moment, Blair allowed himself to embrace this amazing notion.

Smiling in relief at his new Guide's gradual relaxation, Jim held his hand out in invitation. "Bet you could do with the bathroom, hey?" he asked, unbelievably pleased with the tiny nod and shy smile he received in reply.

"Here you go then, Chief. Let's get you up and I'll go fetch the clothes I found for you. You may as well grab a quick shower while you're at it, then we'll get something to eat, OK?" As he spoke he matter-of-factly slid his arm around Blair's waist to support the smaller man's initial shakiness, and led the way to the bathroom.

"There you go, Chief," he said, intending to give his charge some privacy, only to stop in the doorway at the sight of Blair's lost expression. Making no move other than glancing worriedly at Jim, Blair began to tremble again.

Realising immediately what the problem was, Jim stepped forward again and gently took hold of the shaking shoulders. "S'OK, kiddo, look at me," he commanded softly, tipping Blair's chin up so he could make eye contact. Taking in the expressions of confusion, shame and guilt which crossed the expressive face in rapid succession, he expressed his own conclusions at the reaction.

"Bet you haven't been allowed to do anything for yourself for the last few months, have you, Chief?" he murmured gently, getting his answer in the downward glance and the sudden flush of shame that suffused the beautiful features.

"It's just conditioning, babe," he continued gently. "It may take a while, but you'll soon get used to doing your own thing again. Meanwhile, would you like me to give you a hand now? It's no big deal, and I guess I could do with a shower too." Not waiting for a response, he turned away without fuss, and turned on the faucet, adjusting the temperature automatically. Turning back to face the bemused Guide, he quickly helped him get out of the rumpled scrubs, and pointed him in the direction of the toilet to take care of business, while he turned his back to give the impression of privacy while shedding his own clothing.

Hearing the toilet flush, he reached back and took Blair's hand to help him step into the tub, stepping in himself right after. After a few moments of simply letting the warm water pour over them, he reached for the shower gel and began to soap up his Guide, tactfully ignoring the immediate tension the action created. Gently continuing his ministrations, he was rewarded by the incremental release of tension in the slender body, until he reached the tender genitals and bottom. Again, ignoring the sharp intake of breath, and Blair's nervous worrying of his bottom lip, he soaped up and rinsed the areas before continuing to wash himself down. While he did so, he unobtrusively catalogued his Guide's body. Blair was quite severely underweight, probably weighing in at no more than 130 pounds. He was small in stature, about five feet seven inches, and his ribs and hip bones stood out prominently. His shoulders, although rather bony at present, were surprisingly wide, while waist and hips were narrow. The legs, although again rather thin were shapely and in proportion to the torso, and, combined with the almost too pretty face and long, slender neck, Jim could understand Galbini's obsession, and wasn't disappointed on his own behalf that this attractive Guide was now his.

Not worried by the eventual necessity of the sexual bond, Jim had long ago come to terms with his bisexuality, although his occasional dalliances with other men so far were just that –; a no-

strings-attached means to scratch an itch. Come to think of it, most of his dates with women followed the same pattern, until his ill-fated attempt at marriage to Lieutenant Carolyn Plummer, head of Forensics at the PD. Jim knew that the enterprise had been doomed from the start. Carolyn hated the loft, and had no intention of compromising her career to accommodate any of Jim's wishes, whilst expecting him to fit in with hers. Finally deciding that the great sex simply wasn't enough to hold the marriage together, Carolyn filed for divorce, and they returned to being polite professionals in the workplace, which was a far better state of affairs.

Jim was pulled from his musing by the feel of shy hands beginning to wash him down, and he was delighted when his smile of encouragement led to more confident strokes from Blair. It wasn't until Blair reached the sizable erection that Jim was now sporting that things went downhill again. Blair seemed to freeze for a moment, then, face blanking and eyes downturned, he mechanically sank to his knees in front of his Sentinel.

Knowing what his Guide intended, Jim reached down and pulled the smaller man to his feet.

"No, Chief," he said firmly, giving the young man a little shake to get his attention. Blair looked up at him, frightened and confused by the reaction.

"Don't you want me to suck you?" he whispered in a tiny voice.

Jim took a moment to consider his answer because he didn't want to make his Guide feel any worse than he obviously already did.

"Chief," he began gently. "I'm certainly not averse to the idea. You're a really attractive guy, and I'll look forward to any and everything we get to do together - but now isn't the time. You're just acting as you've been conditioned to. When we're both ready to enjoy each other, and when you're healed, then we'll reconsider, but I don't want you to think you have to service me just because we're together now. The love has to be mutual, OK? I don't want a bond based on fear and simple duty on your part."

Pulling the young man into a gentle hug, his erection subsiding, he held on for a few moments until he felt a few tears on his shoulder. "Hey now, it's OK, really, Chief. Come on, the hot water's not going to last much longer," he murmured, turning off the cooling stream and reaching for a large, fluffy towel in which to wrap the slender body. Keeping his tone and actions matter-of-fact, he stepped out of the tub and urged Blair to sit down on the closed lid of the toilet while he used another towel to dry the worst of the water from his Guide's curls. Swiftly drying himself, he wrapped a towel round his waist, and crouched down to Blair's eye level. "I've got some new clothes here for you, Chief. They're on the big side, but I figure they're better than those scrubs. Let's get you into them, OK?"

So saying he helped Blair stand, and finished patting him dry. He helped the smaller man into the boxers and warm socks, which weren't that much too big, and the tee shirt which was,

hanging down almost to his knees. With a smile he held out the shrunken sweats, which, with the cuffs rolled up a couple of times, and the drawstring pulled tight, didn't do too badly.

"Well now, sartorial splendour here, not!" he said, grinning, and was overjoyed to receive a tiny chuckle in response. Compulsively hugging his Guide, he was even happier to feel arms creeping round his waist to return the embrace. 'It really is going to be OK' he thought, pulling back to smile down at the shyly smiling face.

"Come on, I'm freezing here," he said. "I'm just going up to get some clothes."

Leaving the bathroom, and turning for the stairs to the loft bedroom, he realised that Blair was following close behind like a shadow.

Stopping at the foot of the stairs and turning back to face his Guide, he said, "You don't have to follow me everywhere in the loft, kiddo. But perhaps you should see the bedroom anyway. Come on," and with that, he took Blair's hand and led him upstairs towards the large bed. Deliberately ignoring the young man's immediate tension, he simply pushed him down to sit on the edge of the bed while he pattered around getting fresh clothes for himself out of the closet.

By the time Jim had dressed, Blair was noticeably more relaxed, so, taking his hand again, Jim led him back downstairs to the kitchen, where Jim went back to preparing the stir fry. Pouring a large glass of milk for Blair, he sat his Guide down at the kitchen table with his meds, and talked inconsequentially while he cooked, surprising himself with his own chattiness; something with which he'd never previously been associated (just ask Carolyn). He realised he was really comfortable in the other's presence. 'Must be a Guide thing', he thought, smiling inwardly at the notion.

Blair himself was quiet, obviously not accustomed to being allowed to speak unless spoken to, but, remembering what Stoddard had said about the pre-Galbini Blair, Jim hoped that this state of affairs wouldn't take too long to fix. He got the feeling that the old Blair would have been talking up a storm by now.

Dishing up the finished meal, Jim put a good sized plateful in front of his Guide, and tucked in, only to glance up to see Blair, eyes downcast and hands in his lap, obviously waiting for permission to begin. Tapping his Guide's chin to get him to make eye contact, he said gently, "You don't have to ask permission to do everyday stuff while you're with me, Chief. There may well be one or two things like house rules..." he tried for humour, and was rewarded by a little grin, "but don't feel you need to check up with me all the time."

Relaxing again, Blair began to eat, to find that, not only was the food really good, but he actually felt hungry for the first time in what seemed an age, so he tucked in with gusto, oblivious of the amused satisfaction on Jim's face.

When they were both done, Jim suggested that Blair relax on the sofa while he did the clean up. Seeing his Guide drooping again, he realised he was pretty much exhausted himself, and wasn't

too surprised to note that it was well after midnight. It had been a long day for both of them, so after checking the locks, he gathered up his sleepy partner and headed upstairs to bed.

Seating his sleepy Guide once again on the edge of the bed, Jim stripped him down to boxers and tee, and, raising the bedclothes, urged Blair into bed. The fact that the youngster complied without complaint was testimony to his fatigue, so Jim simply stripped to boxers himself, rather than his usual nudity in bed, and spooned up next to the small body. He was rewarded by Blair turning over and snuggling up to him, settling his head on Jim's shoulder like the previous night. Jim found himself momentarily choked with the depth of feeling he had for this beautiful but damaged boy, and swore again to himself that he would do everything in his power to make things good between them. Resolution made, he relaxed into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Late the next morning, Jim roused to find himself more rested than he'd felt in an age, and was convinced that it was on account of the warm body still curled around him. Gently easing himself out of the octopus-like clutches of the still sleeping Guide, he quietly made his way to the bathroom to take a much-needed leak.

Washing his hands, he went to the kitchen to put the coffee on, and contemplated what to prepare for breakfast, when his hearing picked up on the accelerating heartbeat from upstairs which heralded Blair's awakening. He quickly climbed the stairs to make sure that the young man was OK, and not about to go into melt-down again at finding himself in a strange bed, and was struck by the adorable vision of a crumpled, sleepy Guide, sporting one of the most awful cases of bed-hair he'd seen in a good while.

Crossing over to the bedside he gently stroked the soft cheek, rubbing his thumb over the delicate skin beneath a still hazy blue eye. "Hey there, Sleepyhead. How do you feel this morning?" he asked softly. The face below him gradually became more alert, and he was gratified that this morning there was no immediate return of the anxiety and wariness he had become used to seeing on the boy's face. Instead, Blair smiled shyly and reached out to him for another cuddle. Jim was only too happy to oblige, wryly acknowledging that he was getting really sappy, but not in the least worried by the fact. It seemed that, whereas any sexual touch was likely to cause fear and tension in his Guide, Blair positively basked in non-sexual cuddling, and seemed to crave Jim's touch whenever possible. Jim supposed that a lot of it was a 'guide thing', since empaths needed plenty of tactile input. On the other hand, Jim's own 'sentinel thing' responded to his Guide's grounding touch, so the need to cuddle was apparently mutual. Who'd have thought the reserved, taciturn Detective Ellison could have turned out to be such a mush-ball?

After a prolonged and mutually satisfying snuggle, Jim shifted his bedmate slightly. "Hey, Chief, I suspect you could do with using the bathroom, huh?"

Blushing a little, and aware that Sentinel senses could easily decipher his every bodily need, Blair nodded, and made to get out of the cosy nest he'd enjoyed sharing with his apparently accommodating Sentinel. He felt the stirrings of overwhelming adoration for this wonderful man, who was not only the epitome of a Greek god in appearance, but also seemed to be genuinely caring and supportive of a fragile Guide. Concentrating fiercely on his new personal mantra '*think only of the positive, think only of the positive*' he was content to wallow in the present sense of peace and caring, and ruthlessly tamped down thoughts of an eventual return to the real world; particularly the PD and the alarmingly intimidating Captain Banks. He would have been surprised and angrily in denial if he had been made aware of his paragon's reputation at the PD as a moody loner who would probably twist the arms off of any hapless individual who attempted to embrace him without prior warning or permission.

Unaware of his Guide's thought processes, but happy to note his cooperation as regards the bathroom, Jim sat up and held out his hand again to lead Blair back down to the facilities. This time, Blair, with only a slight hesitation, went in by himself to take care of nature and to wash up after. He was only mildly apprehensive when Jim came in with clean underwear and a tee shirt –; the sweats would have to suffice for now as he didn't have anything more appropriate at the moment –; but tensed visibly at the sight of the tube of ointment in Jim's hand.

"Sorry, kiddo, but we're going to have to deal with this. Should really have put it on last night, but I thought you'd had enough to deal with already. It's got to be done, though, to help prevent infection, but it should also feel good after a bit, because Doc Stevens said it has a mild analgesic in it. Do you want to do it yourself, or can I help?"

Blair was grateful for Jim's non-threatening offer, but knew very well that he couldn't bear to touch himself in his sore areas. Quiescent but unhappy he nodded his acceptance of his Sentinel's help, although it shamed him to have to do so. "S'okay," he whispered. "Please go ahead if you don't mind..." and he tailed off into embarrassed silence.

"No problem, Chief," replied Jim immediately, going with his instincts to play down any potentially upsetting situations. Turning Blair to face him, he went with the easier part first, gently smoothing a small amount of the cream on to the young man's sore and still swollen nipples. Smearing a little on the more angry-looking bite-marks, he concentrated hard on not allowing his anger to leak out and further upset his Guide.

Finishing up, he gently turned Blair's back to him. "Sorry, kiddo, but you're going to have to bend forward a bit. Now, don't worry, OK?" he added quickly, when he sensed the boy's rising panic. "I'm going to be as quick as I can, so think some nice thoughts for a couple of minutes, OK? Like, what shall we get for breakfast?" Pleased that the stupid *non sequitur* seemed to have the desired effect, and Blair really did seem to relax minutely, he quickly pulled on a disposable latex glove, and gently worked a good dollop of the cream into Blair's passage. Understandably upset at the intimate touch, Jim was nonetheless impressed by his Guide's sincere attempts to control his reactions, and to relax his inner muscles to accommodate the probing digit.

Finishing up as quickly as possible, and pulling off the glove to put it in the trash, Jim patted the smaller man on the shoulder, then pulled him in for another comforting hug, which lasted until the minute tremors had ceased, and Blair had recovered his equilibrium.

Handing Blair the clean clothes to put on, Jim left the bathroom to prepare eggs and toast to go with the fresh coffee. By the time Blair had reappeared and headed a little hesitantly to the kitchen table, where another tall glass of milk and meds awaited him, Jim had mostly finished the eggs, and was waiting for the toast to pop up. Once they had done, Jim said, "Hey, Chief, why don't you butter the toast for us? The plates are on the counter and butter's beside the toaster." Blair rose with alacrity, pleased to help, and hopeful that he'd do it right, as nothing was more important to him right now as to make his protector happy.

Breakfast prepared and eaten, and with the clean up out of the way, Jim gave Blair the full tour of the loft, since they had both been too wiped last night to do more than go from meal to bathroom to bed.

Jim pointed out the small room under the stairs, currently used as storage space, and explained his plans for turning it into an office where Blair could continue his studies and have a quiet place to retire to when he needed it. He wasn't prepared for his Guide's response, which was for the beautiful blue eyes to fill up with tears of gratitude, and he was more than a little embarrassed to find himself with an armful of sobbing, happy Blair.

Choking back his sniffles, Blair gazed up at his Sentinel with blatant hero-worship, almost incapable of murmuring his heart-felt thanks.

Glad that his plans were a resounding success, but unused to such adulation, Jim huffed a bit and muttered that, since he had a few calls to make, perhaps Blair would like to find something to watch on TV in the meantime, since he should still be taking things easy. So saying, he wrapped an arm round the young man's waist (and how good was *that* getting to feel now?) and steered him back to the couch where he switched on the TV and handed over the controller. Blair looked at him a little uncertainly, then surfed through the channels until he came upon a National Geographic programme about the Amazon, in which he soon lost himself.

After making sure that his Guide was completely engrossed in the programme, Jim took the cordless phone out on to the balcony to make some necessary calls.

His first call was to the PD, where he asked to be put through to Simon's office. Simon's pretty blond secretary, Rhonda, answered, and politely enquired after his health. Normally accustomed to getting a short, snappy reply, she was pleasantly surprised when an apparently relaxed Ellison responded by saying he was good, and hoped she was in good sorts herself? Almost too shocked to answer, she thanked him and put him through to Simon, after which she stared somewhat bemusedly at the phone for some minutes, until another call came in and distracted her.

Simon, on the other hand, was in no mood to be appeased, and barked uncompromisingly down the phone at his absent Detective. "About time, Ellison!" he growled. "I wondered if you were going to grace us with an update today, or are your hands too full with that head-case you're claiming as your Guide? I've got to state for the record that I'm completely against this so-called bond, even if apparently I have no say in the matter; but you're going to have to do some serious work to impress me that you still belong in this department!"

Biting down firmly on his immediate impulse to tell his Captain exactly what he could do with his job, Jim made an admirable attempt at diplomacy, explaining that he'd need a few more days to get his Guide settled (which he would be entitled to even under normal bonding situations) after which he was prepared to come in to the PD and introduce Blair properly. He took the opportunity of mentioning Joel's help and support (hey, he wasn't above using a little emotional blackmail, after all) and terminated the call as quickly as possible before he got too close to the point of blowing his stack at his boss's harsh remarks regarding his new partner.

Next was a call to the Sentinel / Guide Department to check he had the correct information regarding new partnership requirements and privileges.

He was put through to the Director himself, who had taken a personal interest in this unusual pairing. Having been informed of the circumstances surrounding the meeting, he had been advised of the apparent depth of the bond, even though there had been no formal introduction, and no likely sexual bonding in the near future due to the Guide's fragile physical and emotional state. He was pleased therefore to discuss the situation with the Sentinel in question, and suggested that he and his new Guide come to the Institute the following day for a formal introduction. Jim prevaricated a bit, knowing that Blair might still be too traumatised, but agreed in the end to come in if his Guide was up to it.

Thanking the Director for his sympathetic understanding, he hung up, preparing to attempt a search for a number for his next call; that was, to try and contact Blair's wandering mother, Naomi, who apparently hadn't been in touch with her son for over a year. However, before he could come up with a plan to track down the elusive woman, there was a knock on the door, which caused Blair to jump violently to his feet.

Not recognising the scent of the visitor, Jim waved Blair back down to his seat, and carefully opened the door to find a pleasant looking middle-aged man of medium height and build smiling politely up at him. He barely had time to open his mouth in enquiry, when a Blair-shaped blur shot under his arm and latched on to the stranger, who hugged him back with visible affection. Jim was hard-pressed not to grab hold of his errant Guide, and haul him back into the loft, when he registered what Blair was saying.

"Oh Eli, I'm so happy to see you! I thought you'd forgotten me --; I've missed you so much!"

Patting the boy on the shoulder, and pushing back a little, Dr Eli Stoddard seemed just as delighted as his erstwhile student. "There there, my boy. I'm happy too. I'd almost given up

hope of anything coming of my Missing Person report, until your admirable Detective here telephoned me to say you'd been found –; and bonded, even!"

Turning to said Detective, who was standing to one side, torn between feelings of protective jealousy and pleasure in seeing the joyful reunion, Eli extended his hand in greeting. "Very pleased to meet you, Detective Ellison, and many apologies for dropping in on you unawares, but I couldn't keep myself away any longer, as I wished so much to see for myself how young Blair was holding up."

"Apology accepted, Dr Stoddard, and please call me Jim," responded Jim, with a small but genuine smile. "Please come in and make yourself at home. I'm sure we all have a lot to talk about."

"Thank you, Jim, that is most kind of you, and call me Eli, like this young scamp does," he chuckled, patting Blair again.

Jim was amused, but also saddened by the brief glimpse he was being granted of the happy student Blair must have been before the kidnap. Blair was smiling fit to burst, and almost bouncing with excitement, until he glanced towards his Sentinel, and the present crashed in on him. His excitement extinguished as if a switch had been turned off, he shot a look of horror and abject apology at Jim, and backed away hurriedly from Eli, knowing that he had acted out of line, and fully expecting to be punished for it.

Jim and Eli exchanged worried looks, and Jim, indicating that Eli enter with a nod, approached his devastated Guide as if approaching a half-wild colt.

"Hey there, kiddo, it's OK, you've done nothing wrong. It's OK to be happy to see your friend, and he's welcome to visit, so come on and stop looking as if the world is coming to an end." Taking hold of the young man in a gentle hug, he looked over his shoulder at Eli, and asked him to take a seat. "Be with you in a sec, Professor," he said. "We'll just get ourselves calmed down a bit here, OK Chief?" this last addressed to the slender figure in his arms.

A few minutes later, Blair broke away from the embrace with an expression of shame on his face. However, he took a steadying breath and straightened up with visible effort to face the two men. "I'm sorry Eli, Jim. I really do want to get better, but it's so hard..." He tailed off, unsure how to continue, or even if he should. His relief was palpable when he sensed no disgust or anger directed towards him, and he relaxed enough to take a seat next to Jim on the couch facing Eli, who smiled encouragingly at him.

"Blair, my boy, if even half of what I understand you to have been through is true, you have every right to be a little antsy," said the Professor kindly. "However, I think I have something which might distract you for a while in good way," and he reached into the satchel he'd been carrying over his shoulder, and which he had placed at his feet when he sat down.

Curious, both Jim and Blair watched as he pulled a cardboard tube out and handed it to Blair. With a questioning look at his Sentinel, and receiving a nod of encouragement, he took the tube in a slightly trembling grasp, and opened the top of the container.

Withdrawing the certificate rolled up inside, he gasped in shock at what he held in his shaking hand. "Oh, oh!" was all he could manage as he gazed in disbelief at the evidence of the granting of his Master's Degree. With eyes filling with tears of deep emotion, he looked from Eli to Jim, and held out the parchment to his Sentinel to see.

"Oh, Chief, this is great!" came the enthusiastic response. "I knew you were smart, but this is something to boast about! And you got this before you were even 21," he added, noting the date of the award. Choosing not to dwell on how Blair's birthday must have passed in Galbini's household, he concentrated instead on sending waves of pure pleasure and congratulations to his Guide. Happy to see the faint blush of pride on the young face, he decided it wouldn't do any harm to labour the point a bit, especially as he himself was genuinely pleased with Blair's success. "You know," he continued thoughtfully, "We should go get a decent frame for this, and hang it up here in a prominent place. It's no bad thing to have a guide with this sort of smarts. Got to show it off." While he was speaking, he couldn't help but notice the pleased expression on Eli's face, even though Jim knew that the teacher must have been hurting inside to witness the nervous and uncharacteristic quiet his favourite student was displaying.

"Hey, Chief," he continued, amazing himself with his tact, "Why don't you put a fresh pot of coffee on for us?" He was taken aback when the distracted reply came back immediately. "Oh, Eli doesn't do coffee, man, but if you've got herbal tea...uh...oh," and Blair shut down in shock as he realised what he'd done –; spoken out of turn without his Master's permission...*oh god, oh god, sorry, so sorry...!*

Initially surprised, Jim played the situation by ear, and casually pointed to the kitchen cabinets. "There's some on the second shelf, Chief, but it's been there a while, so I don't know how good a shape it's in. Still, if you don't mind giving it a try, Eli, I'm sure Blair can do a better job of making it than me." Swiftly playing along, Stoddard smilingly agreed to try some of the aged tea, and Blair, baffled by the reaction, but happy to escape to the kitchen, placed his precious certificate on the coffee table and hurried to seek out the packet as requested.

While he puttered about in the kitchen, making tea for Eli and preparing a fresh pot of coffee for Jim, the other two men commenced an animated conversation, mostly with Eli regaling the Sentinel with tales of his Guide's exploits over his years of study at Rainier and during the several expeditions in which they had both taken part.

While Jim was pleased to hear of the young man's achievements, he was left wracking his brains to figure out how he could get Blair back some part of his academic life.

Having placed the drinks on the coffee table (well away from his certificate, since there was no way he wanted to get any accidental spills on it), Blair sat close to Jim's side, and while not yet

ready to join in the conversation, he let the comfort of the voices wash over him, and unconsciously pressed tighter until he was nearly sitting in Jim's lap. Far from pushing him off and responding with impatience, Jim casually shifted to accommodate the snuggling, and continued his conversation, happy to see that Eli was acting with the same aplomb, although he did have the suspicion of a tiny grin playing at the edges of his mouth as he spoke. Jim found himself liking this man more and more as the visit went on, and was sorry when Stoddard finally excused himself on the grounds that he had a guest lecture to attend. Rousing at the movement of Jim standing to see Eli to the door, Blair followed closely to say his own goodbyes to Eli, all the while hoping that this wasn't the last time he would get to see his favourite teacher.

Turning as he reached the door, Stoddard shook Jim's hand, then pulled Blair to him in a gentle hug, with a whispered promise that he would keep in touch, and would arrange for the boxes of Blair's belongings which he had stored for him in his absence to be delivered to the loft within the next couple of days. Eyes filling yet again, to his own annoyance, since he *so* hated appearing to be such a wuss, Blair stammered his thanks and stepped back into Jim's arms, smiling at Eli's retreating back.

"Well, Chief, he seems like a great guy," offered Jim, rubbing the smaller man's upper arms. Turning them both to re-enter the loft he said, "Why don't you collect up the tea things, then we'll check out where to hang your certificate. I might have a frame somewhere, but if not, we'll go and get one as soon as you feel able to go out on a shopping spree." Blair smiled happily up at him, and moved to do his bidding with the suspicion of a spring in his step, which left Jim with a feeling of smug self-satisfaction for a job well done. Perhaps this 'Guide rehabilitation' stuff wasn't as impossible as it had first appeared.

The rest of the morning passed without incident as Blair gradually relaxed by increments and concentrated on trying to anticipate his Sentinel's wishes, and maintaining his 'positive' mantra. By lunchtime he was beginning to feel a little more comfortable in doing routine actions without constantly asking Jim for permission, an improvement that Jim greatly appreciated.

The frequent hugs seemed to bolster the young man's confidence to a huge degree, and Jim found himself more and more comfortable in providing the tactile stimulus, especially as it benefited him also, steadying and grounding his senses to a degree he wouldn't have believed possible. If he regretted the total lack of sexual interest in his Guide's aura to date, he could hardly blame Blair, and concentrated on keeping his own hormones under strict control, fully believing that the attraction would happen at the right time.

After a snack lunch of soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, which Blair both helped to prepare, and demolished in good order, he offered to do the clean-up, to Jim's pleased surprise. "Hey, knock yourself out, Chief," he said with a grin. "You might as well get used to where everything goes. By the way, do you cook?"

Ducking his head again, but with less apparent nervousness, Blair replied, "Yes, Sir –; uh –; Jim. I used to love cooking when I could afford the ingredients! Mom used to make me do my share at the communes and retreats we stayed in. She always said men should be capable of doing for themselves." Realising he was running on, something he'd gotten out of the habit of doing, he was surprised to glance up at his Sentinel to find his face wreathed in smiles. Not only was Jim very pleased to know he'd have help in the kitchen and catering department, but he was really happy to hear the young man offering more than one-word responses.

"Guess a lot of the stuff you cook is vegetarian, eh, Chief? Or will you eat meat when you have to?"

Blair's response was immediate. "Mom's vegan, but she never stopped me when I wanted to try other things. I do try to avoid red meat when I can, and I try not to eat too much processed stuff, but I love Thai and Chinese, and Asian when I can afford it. My pasta's pretty good too, if I say so myself," he continued, unaware that he was beginning to gesture as he spoke and there was even a slight bounce in his step.

Thrilled to see the increased confidence in his Guide, Jim refrained from interrupting the little speech –; he was enjoying it way too much. This was surely how 'student Blair' must have been, so he'd do everything he could to encourage the reawakening of what promised to be a fascinating personality.

"Sounds to me like you're on for supper tonight," said Jim with a chuckle. "I could do with some good pasta that I haven't had to cook myself. Perhaps we can find a film to watch later, unless you like watching basketball?"

"Oh yeah, I love watching the Jags, and I play pretty well too! At my height I can duck under most guys' arms...."

Suddenly, he shut down again, in an abrupt change which Jim figured would be part of his Guide's behaviour patterns for a while to come, until he got the worst of the 'slave' conditioning out of his system. However, considering it had only been a couple of days since their first meeting, he reckoned that Blair was doing really well, and was quick to tell him so, accompanying the statement with the customary hug.

Blair returned the hug with a small smile, and promised do his best to stop reacting so negatively to each and every action.

Unfortunately for both Sentinel and Guide, each small step forward seemed to be countered by another one back, or so it seemed to Jim, as he caught the faint whiff of cigar smoke approaching the apartment which could only mean that they were about to get a visit from Simon Banks. Stiffening, he turned to the door, where he made out three heartbeats exiting the elevator. Simon had obviously brought along reinforcements.

Pushing Blair behind him, he stalked to the door and pulled it open just before Simon's hand connected with it, partly just because he *could* and partly because he knew very well it annoyed the shit out his captain.

Huffing with expected irritation, Simon grunted, "Ellison, we have to talk," and moved to enter, only to raise an eyebrow at his detective when Jim failed to stand to one side immediately. Nodding to Simon's companions, who turned out to be Joel Taggert and Megan Conner, an Australian Inspector on an exchange programme with the PD, Jim spoke respectfully but firmly.

"You're welcome to come in, Simon, but I give you fair warning that any undeserved attitude towards my Guide, and you're out, Captain or no Captain."

With that, he stepped aside and let his visitors in, moving himself to go back to Blair's side.

Simon stared at him for a moment, then, raising an eyebrow questioningly, he moved to sit on the single chair facing the couch. Joel stepped towards Jim and Blair with a smile. "Hi Blair," he said "it's good to see you again, and you look much better than the last time! This guy's obviously looking after you so far." Then, with a fake conspiratorial air, he added, "Of course, any complaints with the present accommodation, and you could come stay with me!"

The astounded expression on Blair's face was classic, and brought chuckles from the others (except Simon), but completely without malice, so the empath was aware that it was a joke, but not at his expense. He relaxed visibly, and smiled shyly at Joel, who he already recognised as a good man.

Then Megan stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Hi Blair, my name's Megan Conner, and I've been working at the PD for a few weeks. On an exchange from Down Under, as if it wasn't bloody obvious from the accent. Had the bad luck to work with the big guy there a few times, since I'm supposed to have some guide ability...."

"Huh! No way, Conner" growled Jim, only half-joking. "Guide support from you I could do without. Meet the real thing!" and he eased Blair forward to allow him to respond to the cheerful Australian.

Without making it obvious, Blair surreptitiously scanned the woman, but her slight smirk and raised eyebrow told him he'd been made, but she wasn't annoyed at him. Blushing, he ducked his head and held out his hand, after the usual confirming glance at his Sentinel. Jim sighed internally, realising that some conditioned mannerisms were probably never going to be cured, but glad that at least two of his colleagues approved of his Guide.

Megan gladly took Blair's hand, and looked as if she wanted to pull him into a hug, although she restrained herself after a glance at Jim's lowering expression. "You're really cute, love," she made do with saying. "It'll be good to work with you."

"When we're quite finished with the small talk," Simon broke in, "We need to talk about the bust. I've been talking with the FBI and the Commissioner -; Mayor and Chief too - and although they're pleased with what we achieved, there's been some suggestions made that it could have been better. Apparently Kobayashi was supposed to be in on the meet also, but he got tipped off somehow and left Cascade the day before. Word is that it was one of ours, and there's going to be an internal investigation."

"What are you inferring, Simon?" snarled Jim. "You think it was me? Or perhaps Tony DiLuca?" DiLuca was the deep cover FBI agent. "Because if so, you can put me in front of any PD Sentinel / Guide pair and they'll be able to tell you I'm not lying!"

"No, no," responded Simon, back-peddalling rapidly. "You aren't under suspicion, even if *he*" - nodding towards Blair -; "could have compromised you. It's more likely another cop, although I hate to say it, but I need you to come in to help out with the enquiry. Guess *he'll* have to come too, but that can't be helped," he added ungraciously.

Torn between wanting to rip Simon a new one for the implied insults to his Guide, and a sense of duty to finish the job properly, Jim ground his teeth before answering.

"OK, if Blair agrees," he replied. "We'll come in for a while, but just for the Board of Enquiry for now; the bond is too new to be subjected to any fresh casework yet. That won't be until the Sentinel / Guide Dept give us the go-ahead."

"Agreed," said Simon, obviously relieved with Jim's ready capitulation, as he'd expected a head-butting contest at least on Jim's previous form. Perhaps this guide stuff did have some good points after all...?

Standing, he made to leave, only asking when he could expect the pair to turn up. Jim, carefully studying his Guide's wan face, replied that they would be there in a couple of hours, tops. At that, Simon, Joel and Megan moved to the door, with a friendly, "See you," from Taggart and Conner, if not from Simon.

Once he was sure his visitors were in the elevator, Jim turned back to Blair to find the kid fighting hard not to burst into tears again. "I'm so sorry," Blair whispered past the lump in his throat. "I never cried much before, honest, but I can't seem to stop now...I don't know what's wrong with me...I'm becoming such a wuss...."

Squeezing the young man's shoulder in sympathy, Jim murmured, "No, Chief, it's a normal reaction, believe me. Think of it as a form of PTSD. You'll probably be going into meltdown at unexpected moments for a while to come. Just don't start feeling that it's just you, it's not. There are plenty of guys in the military who've gone through far less trauma than you've suffered who have the symptoms, so don't get thinking you're any less of a man." Jim moved in to cuddle Blair again, amazed at himself for his comments. Ellison, the sympathetic partner, who'd have believed it? Huh!

Blair raised his head after a few moments and said, more firmly than he felt, "OK, I'm ready now. We can go whenever you need, M...er...Jim."

Admiring his partner's spunk, Jim nodded, and went to retrieve his truck keys, and a lightweight jacket which would be very big on his Guide, but would serve to both cover his arms from shoulder to fingertips, and give him some sense of security after being on display virtually naked for so many months. Shrugging into the oversize coat with a grateful look, Blair steeled himself to leave the loft and return to the place which would be part of his future for a long time to come.

The drive to the PD was made in relative silence, with the only comments from Jim being enquiries after his Guide's relative comfort, which were met with whispered but not very convincing assurances from the younger man.

Had it been the Blair of old, he would probably have commented on the cool classic truck his Sentinel chose to drive, followed by an endless mini-lecture on the impact of internal combustion engines on the environment and the evils of pressure on third world countries encouraging them to make the same mistakes in order to compete with the industrialised nations of the Western world, etc. This Blair, however, was turned in on himself, endlessly repeating his 'think positive' mantra and concentrating all his meagre remaining self-control into not embarrassing his Sentinel with the hissy fit to end them all.

The arrival in the parking garage threatened to be as traumatic as the last one, except that this time at least Blair wasn't dressed like a party boy any more, but more like a scruffy hippy in the oversize jacket and rolled-up borrowed sweats. Jim wasn't taking any prisoners though, when it came to snide comments, so more than one uniform shrank beneath his furious glare as he steered Blair to the elevator.

Once in the relative quiet of an empty elevator car, Jim realised that his Guide was only wearing a pair of his own white socks, as they hadn't yet been able to buy any new clothes or shoes, and Blair's own boxed up possessions weren't due to be delivered from Dr Stoddard until tomorrow at least. The small oversight could well prove to be a disaster out of all proportion with its actual nature if anyone was foolish enough to mention it in the already shaky guide's hearing. *'Talk about last straws,'* thought Jim. His protective instincts were growing with every step they took towards the MCU, and it wouldn't have taken much to send them both back down to the truck and home.

Finally reaching their destination, Jim looked down at the small figure tucked under his arm. "OK Chief?" he enquired. "Just remember that I'm going to be right with you the whole time, and any sign of trouble, I'm taking you out of here. I don't care what they say; I'm not having you upset unnecessarily, OK?"

Unable to articulate an answer, Blair swallowed hard and glanced up at Jim with a small nod of acquiescence. Straightening his shoulders inside the large jacket, he took a deep breath and stepped into the bullpen alongside his Sentinel, determined not to bolt this time. Proud of his Guide's courage, Jim steered him straight for the conference room where his senses had already told him the members of the enquiry board were gathered.

Knocking once and entering immediately, Jim and Blair faced the group which consisted of Simon, Captain Sullivan, Special Agent Matthews and the undercover agent Tony DiLuca, and the Chief of Police. Also present were the Sentinel / Guide pair from Homicide, Ralph Smithson and his Guide and wife Stephanie, and the Director of the Sentinel / Guide Department himself, Adam Kingsley and his chief Science Officer, Dr Gerry Larsen.

"Thank you for coming, Sentinel Detective Ellison, Guide Sandburg," said Director Kingsley formally, rising from his chair. "We very much appreciate your agreeing to come in, especially in view of your unfinished bonding process," he continued, looking around at his colleagues for their approval. Only Simon and Captain Sullivan showed any signs of disagreement, but were too politic to voice their complaints.

Nodding to the Director, and surveying the room in general, Jim led Blair over to two spare chairs, making sure his Guide was settled close to him within his protective shield. Sending support and comfort to his Guide through their developing mental link, and receiving love and determination in return, he prepared to hear what the board had to say.

The Chief of Police started the proceedings by outlining what had actually been achieved at the bust; who had been taken into custody, and who was likely to receive significant sentences. The list was comprehensive and impressive, but Jim could tell there was a 'but' about to follow. He wasn't disappointed when the Chief continued by confirming that it had been believed that the Japanese crime lord Kobayashi had also been expected to be present, but had left the day before after being tipped off by person or persons unknown, and had returned to his own turf in Seattle where he continued to operate unchecked.

Having already heard this much from Simon earlier, Jim was impatient to get down to the details and see what the theories were regarding the source of the tip-off. Before the discussion could get underway, however, there was knock on the door, which opened to admit two of Sullivan's detectives from Vice.

"Hey, Captain. Mancuso here said you wanted to see us about the Showgirl bust?" drawled the first man without ceremony; a tall, tough-looking man by the name of Barney Davidson. His partner, a slightly shorter, but equally tough Hispanic called Eric Mancuso, nodded in agreement; an arrogant half-smirk tugging at his full lipped mouth.

Standing, Sullivan excused himself for a moment, and followed his men outside, unaware of the drama unfolding behind him.

Like the others present, Blair looked up at the newcomers, but his reaction took his Sentinel, and everyone else, completely by surprise. Face blanching dramatically, he dived under the desk to huddle at Jim's feet, clinging desperately to Jim's leg.

"Nonononononono...don't let them take me...not again, never again...!"

"Chief, what is it? What's up?" Jim asked worriedly, almost overwhelmed by the feelings of panic and terror pouring into him from his Guide. The other Sentinel / Guide pairing looked almost as upset as they picked up on the young man's strong emotional reaction.

"Oh, for God's sake!" growled Simon impatiently, so very unwilling to have the peace disturbed yet again by Ellison's weird little hippy partner. He really was beginning to feel that it simply wasn't worth the effort to retain Ellison in MCU, and replayed the opening notes from 'The Twilight Zone' in his head.

"Not now, Captain!" snapped Director Kingsley, knowing that there had to be good reason for Blair's outburst, and wanting to get to the bottom of the mystery as soon as possible. His thoughts were echoed by the others there, so Simon was out-voted for the time being.

Meanwhile, Jim had succeeded in pulling the smaller man onto his lap, and was working on calming him down before he descended into a full-blown panic attack.

"Hush, now Chief, I've got you, nothing's going to get you, I promise," he repeated, over and over again in as soothing voice as he could manage. Little by little the body in his arms relaxed, but the tremors didn't cease fully.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, but was only in fact a few minutes or so, Blair raised his head from Jim's neck and looked fearfully towards the door. "Those men –; they were there – ; hurt me –; saw them at Galbini's club. Please don't let them see me!"

"Too late for that, son," Director Kingsley murmured, as the Vice officers had stepped back inside with their captain to see what the fuss was all about.

Davidson spotted Blair immediately, and, nudging his partner surreptitiously, (or so he thought) he nodded towards the small Guide.

"Who's this then? He your new partner now, Ellison? Where did you find him, Guides'R'Us?" His attempt at a bald-faced bluff couldn't fool the sentinels present, and the others took their cue from the angry growls emerging from the throats of almost primal creatures.

In the cause of self-preservation, Mancuso backed out of the room hurriedly, followed by his partner, and both raced off down to the elevators as fast as possible. The only reason they managed their escape was because their captain bravely, if somewhat foolishly, placed himself in the doorway in an attempt to prevent the irate sentinels from taking them down. His courage paid off in this instance, because Stephanie grabbed her husband's arm, and pointed urgently at Blair. The small Guide was desperately clinging to Jim's waist to hold him back, wanting only

to prevent bloodshed which could conceivably take his partner away from him. Despite his indubitably distressed state, he couldn't allow Jim to get into trouble with other cops on his behalf, even if they deserved everything they got.

Between them the two guides got their sentinels seated again, but Blair was in real trouble by then, overloading on the deep emotions swirling round him, and unable to rely on the support of a full bond to hold him together.

Realising this, Jim turned his full attention back onto his Guide, and wrapped him in a close embrace, unashamed of the need to cling to each other for comfort, especially since Ralph and Stephanie were also indulging in their own mutual comfort regime.

Squirring a little in his seat, Simon looked pointedly away from the pairs, but the others waited patiently until relative calm was regained.

"I think we need to know what sparked that off, if Guide Sandburg is up giving us an explanation," said the Chief of Police, not unkindly.

"Just give him a bit longer, and I'll see what I can do," replied Jim. "But if he can't talk about it yet, I won't force him, whatever it is."

"Fair enough," responded the Chief. "But we'll all be grateful if he can be persuaded –; without further duress, that is."

Nodding abstractedly, Jim continued to rub his partner's back with a soothing hand, whilst whispering reassurances that no one was going to get to him without going through Jim first. Eventually, Blair patted his chest gently, and pushed back a little.

"I'm OK now, Jim. Well, better," he qualified, with a shaky chuckle. "I can explain, but I'm so scared you'll hate me when you hear the sort of things I had to do –; have done. I don't know how you can bear to touch me."

"Ssh, Chief, never going to happen," comforted Jim. "But I do want to know what went on, simply so I know what I'm up against when the nightmares start. But don't let's discuss that now, it'll wait until we're back home at the loft."

"Home," breathed Blair, almost too quietly even for sentinel ears. "That sounds so wonderful. I don't want to spoil it...."

Turning in his Sentinel's arms, he apologised softly and rather shamefacedly to the assembled Board, and, leaning against Jim's broad chest for comfort and support, he began.

Blushing with embarrassment, and staring fixedly at the floor, he explained in a small voice how he had come to be in Galbini's household, and for how long. He tried hard not to go into too much detail about the 'training' and grooming he had undergone; although there were one or two sympathetically-worded questions posed at a few points which he couldn't ignore;

concentrating instead on what was more relevant to this enquiry; i.e. the reason he was acquainted with the two Vice detectives.

He told of Galbini's habit of sharing his favourite 'pet' with valued clients, or those he wished to impress. Explaining to the assembly how he was usually drugged before larger parties, partly to promote amnesia in their plaything, and partly to make him more compliant, there were occasions when it pleased Galbini to keep him fully aware and awake during the abuse.

Such an occasion occurred during a specially planned party held upstairs at one of Galbini's clubs, where the guests of honour included Kobyoshi himself and his chosen bodyguards and colleagues.

Unable to verbalise the atrocities meted out on the young man's body throughout the evening, Blair jumped ahead to where he regained consciousness much later on, to find himself being treated by Galbini's tame but disinterested doctor, and witnessing a strange scene.

Galbini was nowhere in sight, so had presumably returned to the mansion, but Kobyoshi was talking animatedly to two of the other 'guests', namely Mancuso and Davidson, who Blair had taken to be Kobyoshi's men. Although in too much pain to concentrate fully on what was being said, Blair remembered hearing phrases referring to a 'meet', where several other clients of Galbini's were due to exchange a large amount of drugs, weapons and laundered money all in one go, in an attempt to cement Galbini's much-desired reputation as a major player. As he began to grey out again at the doctor's less-than-gentle ministrations, he knew he had heard the man he now knew as Detective Davidson distinctly warn Kobyoshi against attending, because there was likely to be a bust. The ensuing clean-up of many of his rivals would leave Kobyoshi in a strong position to take over the others' turf, and enable him to become one of the most powerful crime lords on the West Coast.

At that point, Blair's voice faltered and ceased, and he turned his face once more into Jim's shoulder, desperately seeking his Sentinel's strength and comfort.

The room was silent for long moments after he finished speaking, then Simon Banks stood up. "I don't know about the rest of you," he declared, "but I am very reluctant to take the word of an acknowledged sex-toy against that of two of Cascade's finest, even if it does sound plausible. How in God's name do we get genuine proof that what he's claiming is true? This could be some form of vengeance for all we know, to get his own back on as many of his alleged 'clients' as possible!"

Blair gasped audibly, and buried his face further into Jim's neck; unaware of the frowning reception Banks' words had had on most of those present.

As for Jim, he was torn between maintaining his hold on his Guide, who plainly needed the touch, and getting up in his captain's face for his heartless comments. He was saved from speaking by the snarled words from Ralph Smithson, who, backed up by Stephanie, stated

uncompromisingly that his senses confirmed that Guide Sandburg was speaking the truth, and that Banks was out of order in questioning the integrity of Sentinel pairings and their acknowledged role as lie-detectors, amongst other things.

Silently agreeing with Smithson's words, but needing to maintain the peace, Director Kingsley held up his hand and addressed the room.

"I'm sure we all know and respect the part sentinel senses play in our roles as peace-keepers," he said, with a repressive sideways glance at Simon. "And we are more than grateful for Guide Sandburg's contribution to this enquiry. I propose that we let Jim and Blair go home for some reconnecting and mutual comfort, while the rest of us concentrate on apprehending Mancuso and Davidson for questioning. Lady and gentlemen, let us adjourn for now and let the follow up commence!" He was aware that his words came over as somewhat trite and pompous, and a little amusing because of it, but that was the effect he wanted; defusing a potentially explosive situation.

Nodding his approval, Jim tucked his Guide under his arm again and headed for the door and the elevators without another word.

The ride back to the loft was completed in virtual silence, this time due to the contemplation of still-fresh memories in the case of the wounded Guide, whose 'positive thinking' mantra seemed to have taken a back seat for the present, and the equally disturbed thoughts spinning round in his Sentinel's brain, nearly all of which were centred on his Guide and said Guide's well-being.

Jim was relieved to reach Prospect without delay, and quickly parked up and moved around to the passenger side to open the door for Blair. He was relieved when Blair didn't immediately cringe away from him, but sending out his senses, he 'felt' the uncomfortable emotions churning inside his partner's consciousness, and was disturbed by the uncertainty apparent in Blair's face. Holding out his hand to help his Guide down from the truck, in deference to his still-healing injuries, he was relieved when Blair grasped it willingly, and allowed himself to be eased out. He was even happier when the smaller man accepted being tucked closely into Jim's side, and he walked them both into the building and into the ancient elevator, and from thence to the loft.

When they slipped tiredly into the welcoming calm, Jim vaguely noted the flashing message light on his phone, but disregarded it in favour of getting Blair his meds, a snack, if he could manage to face eating something, and a swift trip to bathroom and bed.

Totally emotionally and physically exhausted, Blair was completely pliant, and made no moves to deny his Sentinel's apparent need to coddle him. He was so wiped that the attention, far from

being unwanted, was received with gratitude, and he barely registered the placing of the usual glass of milk and handful of meds next to his hand as he sat drooping at the kitchen table.

Although in his deepest fears he figured that the sentinel may well be getting fed up with dealing with such a pathetically inadequate guide, he was grateful for the present respite from sad thoughts and loneliness.

Standing suddenly with tears threatening to overflow from devastated blue eyes, Blair stumbled over to his Sentinel, craving nothing more than to be cuddled and reassured; for someone to keep the demons at bay for a while longer. He was almost completely undone when Jim opened his arms and pulled him in without question, proving by his very actions that Blair was indeed loved, protected and needed. It was almost too much.

"Please Jim. Take me. I need you so much!" He was barely aware of his own words, but was convinced of the truth of them. He wanted and needed to belong to this wonderful man, and wanted so much to be everything Jim needed, even if it was realistically unlikely. It would be no sacrifice on his part to be claimed fully by his chosen partner.

Unwilling to question his luck, Jim felt an internal shout of glee bubbling up at the heart-felt declaration from the dear little body in his arms. Reason kicking in, however, he was duty bound to ensure that his Guide's offer was genuine, and not a knee-jerk reaction to the traumatic interview at the PD.

Pushing the trembling body back a little way he kissed the broad forehead, and tilted the face up so he could read the emotions in those beautiful eyes.

"Chief, I have to say that I'm totally in awe of your commitment, and I so want to make you mine in every way, but, please don't take this the wrong way - but are you really sure? Because if you are, then I won't keep you waiting any longer. I've wanted you from the moment I saw you. All I want to do is take care of you for the rest of our lives, and make sure that we achieve all I believe we were meant to by whatever powers are looking after us."

'Sappiness be buggered', he was moved to think, (borrowing from their Aussie Inspector). The depth of emotion he felt from his Guide was enough to convince him that his declaration of commitment was both received and welcomed. Add to that the few tears of relief and happiness that spilled over from Blair's eyes, and he moved both of them towards the stairs to the bedroom.

"Do you need the bathroom, Chief?" he asked, thinking that perhaps a reminder of the mundane might help temper the growing emotional situation here.

Blair seemed to think about the question, then nodded, but appeared to be unwilling to make the necessary movement by himself. Jim had no problem in helping him out, and turned them both towards the bathroom, where he pointed his Guide towards the commode whilst stripping off his own clothes.

Tactfully ignoring his Guide's taking care of business, and washing up, he followed suit, and then, gently turning Blair towards him, he asked if he would like a shared shower first?

Blair was nonplussed for a moment, then quiescent, as he realised that this was something that Jim would like. He nodded shyly, and waited for Jim to make the next move.

Jim smiled gently at him, then moved to turn on the shower, automatically adjusting the temperature to suit. Taking his Guide's hand in a replay of their previous shower, this time he was quicker to start soaping up the beloved body, automatically noting, and discounting, the blemishes he found, and concentrating on making Blair feel really good. He was particularly gentle when washing the nipple area; sentinel touch registering just how sore they still were. The same applied to the tender genital and anal region, but this time he was astounded to feel a positive reaction. Blair was actually getting hard at his super-gentle ministrations, and he was moved once again with the strength of the boy's spirit.

When Blair moved to reciprocate, he received the worshipful ministrations with awed gratitude, so that, once they were both clean and dry, he was more than ready to lead his partner up to their shared bed.

Blair followed willingly, even eagerly, and stood beside the bed awaiting Jim's directions. Knowing that this situation was so far removed from Galbini's commands that there was no comparison, he had no trouble in disassociating himself from the actions of the last few months, and was eager to make his commitment to his Sentinel.

When the sculptured body moved up close, he suffered a momentary pang of uncertainty; again not because of the situation, but because of his own disbelief that such a god among men could possibly want to mate with such as himself.

Jim seemed to be aware of his self-doubt, and was quick to reassure him; actions speaking louder than words in this instance.

Laying the small figure down in the centre of the bed, he proceeded to explore and enjoy the beautiful body laid out before him with such care and obvious delight that Blair couldn't fail to be assured of his Sentinel's love and care for him. Although he knew he was still less than completely healed, it seemed to him that this was of no consequence when it came to the cementing of their love, so he refused to listen to his internal warnings.

As it happened, the warnings were unnecessary, because Jim was fully in tune with his Guide's needs, even in the full heat of bonding, and his rational persona had no intention of causing pain.

Thus it was that, after preparing his Guide with the super-gentle touch of an alpha sentinel, Jim propped himself against the head of the bed with a pile of pillows, and lifted Blair on to his lap. Momentarily unsure of Jim's intent, the Guide was still for a moment, then he realised that Jim meant for him to ride on the impressive cock between them.

"It's OK if you don't want to, Chief," murmured Jim, "But this is the best way of doing this. If you ride me, you can control just how much and how fast you can take me. If it gets too much for you, I promise I'll pull out and do my best not to hurt you, OK?" Although he wasn't entirely sure he could live up to his promise, he truly meant to try, so sat back and waited for his Guide's response.

He was both moved and relieved when Blair, gazing at him with determined concentration, positioned himself over Jim and guided Jim's cock into his waiting hole.

It was undeniably painful at first, the half-healed tissues protesting mightily at the invasion, but, before Jim could pull back in sympathy, Blair sank lower onto the large erection, and panted harshly while he adjusted to the stretching.

After what seemed to Jim to be an agonising age, Blair raised his head and began to move slightly, gradually increasing the tempo as his passage grew accustomed to the pressure. A few strokes later, and Jim knew he'd hit the 'hot spot' when Blair moaned and further increased his movements. From thereon they both became totally wrapped up in each other, each striving to both enjoy themselves and pleasure each other in equal measure, such that, when the mutual climax was achieved, the bond sang between them, and they were tossed into a world of shared pleasure and understanding.

Jim was beset by a swirling mix of emotions as he was allowed to fully enter his Guide's mind: enormous gratitude for the gift of the youngster's unconditional trust in him and adoration such as he had never hoped or believed himself worthy of, amazement at the sheer breadth of Blair's experiences in such a short life, and deep sorrow and anger for the many hurts visited upon the boy, not all of which had happened in the few traumatic months of his captivity. Glimpses of past disappointments and broken friendships as a result of an itinerant lifestyle; episodes of bullying and unwitting neglect by his adored but ditzy parent; treatment bordering on child abuse with one or two of his Mom's many boyfriends, the list went on.

Such episodes notwithstanding, he was cheered and amazed by the resilience he could sense, and the youthful hope and naivety not yet extinguished, which Jim pledged to nurture to the best of his ability.

For Blair's part, he entered his Sentinel's mind much more carefully, primed as he now was to avoid confrontation and overt inquisitiveness. He moved slowly through the areas where he felt comfortably welcome, but side-stepped any which appeared shielded or blocked, although his empathic ability could undoubtedly have pushed his way in.

He tentatively picked out impressions of Jim's lonely, mostly motherless childhood, his disappointment in his only brother's treacherous competitiveness and his father's harsh upbringing, which ultimately led to Jim's taking refuge in the military.

He picked up flashes of action with the Rangers, and Jim's disillusion following a botched incident in the jungles of Peru which led to his leaving the army and joining Cascade PD.

He side-stepped areas concerned with his Sentinel's involvement in black ops, and passed only briefly over the ill-fated marriage to Lieutenant Plummer.

Overlaying it all was the sense of Jim's commitment to him and his welfare, and the deeply comforting protectiveness which he could feel cushioning him body and soul.

Moved once again to tears of pure love, he threw his arms around the strong neck and pressed himself down onto the hard body, ignoring the twinges from his half-healed cuts and bruises, and virtually oblivious of the soreness of his passage, even when Jim's softening cock slid out of him.

Jim reciprocated by cuddling the slim body close, and whispering endearments such as he had never done to any of his past bedmates, even his wife, who would more than likely have laughed at him.

Finally, worn out but fully in tune with each other, they settled down to sleep with limbs tangled comfortably after Jim had roused himself just enough to give them both a quick clean up, and check his Guide for further damage. He was relieved to find just a minute spot of blood, and no new tears or bruising. Smoothing a little of the antiseptic cream on his already sleeping Guide's reddened anus, he spooned around the cherished body and swiftly followed him into sleep.

The next morning, Jim surfaced from a solid night's rest, and turned carefully to look at the small bundle of Blair curled up tightly next to him, arm encircling Jim's waist, and head comfortably pillowed on his shoulder.

His Guide and now lover looked incredibly young and innocent in repose, and already seemed to Jim to be gradually losing the drawn and tight expression which had been noticeable even in sleep during that first night at Galbini's mansion. He snuffled endearingly, and had managed to drool a little on Jim's pectorals –; something the new Jim accepted with a rueful smile rather than growling irritation. Lying there relaxed and warm with an armful of beloved Guide, Jim allowed himself a few more moments of quiet contemplation before getting himself moving, and was pleased and even a little smug to mull over how he knew he had changed for the better almost overnight, and all due to the boy in his life and his bed.

It wasn't the case, however, that he thought that everything was going to be coming up roses from now on though. He was well aware that their new partnership was going to have more rough patches than most, simply because of the odd circumstances surrounding their imprinting. Blair, through no fault of his own, would undoubtedly have to put up with bad attitudes and sneering comments from the less sympathetic and enlightened members of the

PD, although Jim fully intended to shield him from as many of such incidents as an alpha sentinel was able.

He was, however, determined that they would strengthen their bond with every passing day, and he knew that neither of them would ever be alone again.

Finally, with the call of the bathroom growing urgent, he gently disentangled himself from the octopus-like clutches of his Guide, pushing his pillow into the clinging grasp and slipping out of the bed before Blair got wise to the substitution. Muttering crossly, Blair turned over again and snuggled back down into the cosy nest of blankets until only the top of his curly head was left showing.

Chuckling to himself, Jim trotted downstairs to the bathroom, where he relieved himself with a sigh of pleasure, and decided to have a quick shower before fixing breakfast.

Ten minutes later, showered, shaved and comfortable in clean boxers and robe, he set about making fresh coffee and preparing the eggs and toast his Guide seemed to like so much. Remembering with a smile Blair's confession regarding preferred foodstuffs, he decided against bacon, (just for today) and listened for any sounds of movement from upstairs.

Sure enough, a slightly elevated heart rate and almost sub-vocal mutters heralded his Guide's slow climb to wakefulness, and the softly uttered "Jim?" had him mounting the stairs in time to see the spectacular bed-hair pushing upwards from the blankets.

"Hey, kiddo," he said with a smile. "Guess you smelled the coffee, huh?" He was rewarded by the first instant and unaffected smile he had yet seen on the young man's face, and was almost taken aback by its dazzling effect on him. His own smile widening in return, he reached out and pulled the eager body into his arms, thoroughly enjoying the sheer joy of the spontaneous hug.

Moments later, they broke apart when there was a knock on the door, which left Jim mortified that he hadn't registered anyone's approach, so involved was he in their cuddling.

"It's OK, Chief," he said reassuringly, "I'll take care of it. Why don't you get my robe and do whatever you need in the bathroom?" So saying, he ran downstairs and paused long enough for his Guide to get into the spare robe and slip down to the bathroom and shut the door.

With the knocking growing more and more urgent and impatient, he threw the door open with a scowl, only to be momentarily side-tracked by the sight of a uniformed delivery man complete with clipboard and trolley filled with a pile of boxes. Belatedly recalling that Professor Stoddard had promised to send Blair's things around, Jim signed for the shipment, and helped the delivery guy manoeuvre the trolley into the loft. Thanking him, and reaching for his wallet to give the guy a reasonable tip, he shut the door behind him and called to Blair, knowing full well that the kid would be hiding behind the closed door waiting to be given the all-clear.

Calling out to Blair to come out and check out the boxes, he moved to the phone to replay his messages, and, sure enough, there was the Professor's cheerful voice advising Jim that he had arranged for the delivery of Blair's boxes before 9.00 am that day. Hearing the message, Jim was heartily glad he was an early riser, so he'd had time to shower before the delivery. He wondered what the man would have made of him struggling downstairs rumped and still reeking of sex?

Blair peeked out of the bathroom, and, seeing the pile of boxes, ran forward to stop dead in front of the nearest box. Jim had to swallow hard round the lump in his throat at the expression on Blair's face. He looked like a little kid at Christmas, whose every wish had been granted.

"I can't believe it!" he whispered. "Eli did this for me! I didn't even know anyone realised I was gone! It's so great!" and with that, he fell to his knees to start tearing at the tape holding the box shut.

Not wanting to spoil the kid's pleasure, but also wanting him to take a few minutes to have a bite of breakfast, and his coffee and meds at least, Jim spoke up.

"Whoa there, Chief! Not that I mind you covering the floor with packing cases, but slow up just a second. I really think we should get some breakfast and get you washed and dressed first." He could have bitten his tongue when he saw Blair's reaction. Ducking his head in red-faced embarrassment, the boy shut down and backed away from the box he'd been attacking.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean to make a fuss, I swear. I'll tidy everything away, I promise."

"Aw, Chief, I wasn't telling you off," responded Jim with a rueful grimace. "I'm really happy you've got your stuff, but I just wanted us to take a bit of a step back before unpacking. I'd like us to decide where everything should go, especially as it looks like you've got quite a pile of books and papers to store. Let's just take a moment to get ourselves organised, OK?" and with that, he crossed the room to loop a comforting arm around the drooping shoulders.

Gracing Jim with a tiny smile, Blair settled at his Sentinel's touch, and leaned back into the embrace. "I'm sorry, Jim," he said. "I guess I'm still worried about being punished for acting impetuously. I'll go get a quick shower, and help you with breakfast if you want. If you wouldn't mind though, could I just look in the 'clothes' box so I can get out something to wear?"

"Sure, baby," was the affable response. "I don't think those old sweats would do another day anyway."

Hugging Jim briefly, Blair hurried to open the relevant box, and withdrew some old but clean items. Aged boxers and mismatched socks were followed by even older faded jeans and a blue Henley. The final item was an obviously soft, well-worn blue plaid flannel shirt.

Biting his cheek to refrain from making the unkind comments that sprang immediately to mind, Jim smiled in encouragement and backed away towards the kitchen. "Breakfast in ten, Chief, so

make it quick," he said, and was enormously proud of himself for holding back his guffaws until the bathroom door was closed again.

By the time Blair re-emerged no more than the allotted ten minutes later, Jim had himself well under control, and was, in fact, suitably impressed by his Guide's appearance. Although the kid's clothes had undoubtedly seen better days, he looked happy, relaxed and comfortable, and, Jim had to admit, the blues in the Henley and shirt really brought out the colour in Blair's beautiful eyes.

"Hey, you look just like I imagined you would," he admitted almost honestly. "Much better than borrowed sweats, huh?" and he put the plate of eggs and toast down beside the coffee and meds. "Sit down and tuck in, Chief. The sooner we're done, the sooner we can start sorting out your stuff." And with that, he set to with his own food, and was pleased to see Blair go at his share with a will.

Breakfast over with in double-quick time, Blair looked longingly at the pile of boxes, and, receiving a nod of encouragement from Jim, he set about unpacking the rest of the clothes, as that box was already open.

Jim sorted through the items as they were lifted out, and put them in tidy piles to be carried upstairs and placed in the drawers and section of closet which Jim had already cleared out. Seeing that Blair had little in the way of smarter clothes, or a warm coat for that matter, he knew he'd be fixing that situation before too long.

Clothes unpacked, Blair was now buried in one of the boxes marked 'books', and was pulling out stacks of anthropology volumes and journals, as well as loose-leaf files and notebooks. Happily crowing over every item, he smiled up at Jim with such a look of satisfaction that Jim couldn't help but smile in response.

Taking up some of the tomes, he moved to the spare room under the stairs, where he placed them in a stack on the old futon in there. "We'll have to get some proper bookshelves in here, Chief," he said, "Because there's too many to fit on my shelves with my books, and it'd probably be best if you keep them all together for easy access. Besides, once we get it sorted, this will be your office anyway." With his back still turned to the doorway, he couldn't see Blair's grateful, but slightly watery expression, although sentinel hearing picked up the convulsive swallow, and Jim could easily scent the faint tang of saline from the tears threatening to fall. Deciding it was better not to make an issue of his Guide's tendency to over-react; a state of affairs he was sure would ease once the young man was feeling less fragile; Jim turned back with a quick smile of encouragement, and bent to pick up the next pile.

After the other books had been unpacked and lovingly checked over, and piled into the new 'office', Blair started on the couple of other boxes remaining.

One held a few artefacts and knick knacks Blair had undoubtedly picked up on his travels, plus a small photo album, and the second held a colourful afghan and a bedraggled old backpack.

This last had Blair almost bouncing with glee, as he pulled out a battered older-style laptop and a handful of CDs and floppy disks.

"Oh Jim!" he cried, almost beside himself with joy. "It's all here! All my notes, my files! Everything I was working on when I was grabbed...!" For once not cringing at the thought of the kidnap, so happy was he at the discovery, that he jumped into Jim's open arms and hugged the Sentinel hard.

"That's really great, kiddo," said Jim, genuinely pleased that the building blocks needed to get his Guide's life back on line were apparently unharmed. "Perhaps when things have settled down a bit, Eli can suggest how you can go back to the U in some capacity. I'm afraid that you may not be able to take up your place in the doctoral programme yet, although I really wish you could, Chief, but I'm sure there must be some way you can continue your studies."

"I know, Jim, and I truly appreciate that you're willing to let me keep in touch with Rainier, but I also know that I'm going to have to learn so much so I can be of use to you. Any academic stuff will be great, but you're the most important person in my life right now."

Jim gulped, and realised that it was his turn for the emotional response. Jeez! 'Iron Man' Ellison was about to melt in the face of his Guide's declaration of devotion and duty. Simultaneously, he realised that he really didn't give a shit. This was what it was all about with Sentinel / Guide bonding, and that was more than OK with him.

Changing the subject simply to give himself a breathing space, he said, "You know, Chief, I was thinking that I might have a suitable frame for your certificate. It's down in the basement store, so, if you're OK with taking the rest of your stuff into the office, I'll just nip down and get it." Knowing that his empathic Guide would understand, he grinned a little self-consciously and went to the key basket to get the appropriate key set.

"Sure, Jim, and thanks so much," replied Blair, intuitively realising that Jim needed a little space, and feeling confident enough now to be alone in the loft for a little while at least.

Down in the basement, Jim went unerringly to the box where he had packed away all the bits and pieces acquired during his all-too-brief marriage. Remembering that the single formal portrait of him and his new bride had been placed in a rather tasteful, certificate-sized frame, he located the item and contemplated it carefully.

It was undoubtedly a good photographic portrait. He and Carolyn looked like the typical handsome and happy couple, but he removed the photo from the frame without a second thought, just pausing long enough to tuck the picture safely between the leaves of the wedding

album lying in the bottom of the box. Nodding to himself in satisfaction, he repacked the rest of the box, and locked up the storage area to return to the loft and his Guide.

Reaching the door to #307, he knocked once, so as not to startle Blair, then went in, holding the frame out to his Guide. "What do you think, babe? Will this be OK?"

As he might have expected, Blair's eyes lit up with genuine glee, and he rushed to get his certificate from the coffee table. "Oh Jim, its great!" he gushed. "Oh, man, its perfect! Are you sure?"

"Breathe, Chief," chuckled Jim. "Yes, I'm quite sure. It wasn't being used for anything important, really, and I'd far rather see your Masters' cert in here. We've still got to decide where we can put it, so it's in plain view," he finished, smiling gently at his Guide's faint blush of happiness.

Taking the certificate from Blair's hand, he quickly fitted it into the frame, and walked to the wall across from the living area. "How's about here Chief?" he asked, placing the frame in line of sight from the main seating. "No one could miss it from here!" he declared cheerfully, looking back over his shoulder.

He just caught a swiftly concealed look of wonder and amazement on Blair's face.

"Are you sure you want to do that, man?" murmured Blair uncertainly. "Mom would probably say that it was an unnecessary demonstration of ego...."

"Bullshit, Chief!" was the swift response. "There is absolutely *nothing* wrong with simply displaying proof of a worthy achievement. I'm sorry, Blair, but it sounds to me that your Mom was way too quick with the new-age clichés. You earned this, Chief, and I intend to make sure that people know it. Eli would want that too, you know he would."

Squeezing his Guide's shoulder, he moved towards the small toolkit he kept handy in the under-sink cabinet, and took out a hammer and picture hanger. Without pause, he knocked a picture hook into the wall, and hung the certificate in his chosen spot.

Knowing he had over-ridden his Guide's protests to a certain extent, he was equally sure that this was one of those occasions when he knew he was right to do so, and that Blair would secretly be glad to submit to the *fait accompli*. Stepping back, Jim admired his handiwork, and was pleased and relieved when Blair crept up to his side and gazed in happy wonderment at the symbol of his achievement.

"Thanks, Jim, it's great," he whispered, and turned to hug his Sentinel yet again.

Following a snack lunch, Jim suggested that they go and do some grocery shopping so that Blair could prepare some of his pasta for dinner. Although he knew he really ought to check in with the PD, the Sentinel / Guide Department's guidelines for newly bonded pairs allowed for up to two weeks' maximum 'bonding leave' to cement the new partnership.

Considering that the first three days of his and Blair's unorthodox pairing had been more traumatic on several counts than virtually any other partnerships he was aware of, and since it was Friday already, he thought he was more than justified in kicking back for a long weekend at least in order to let Blair settle even more into his new home and relationship.

Blair was a little wary at the thought of leaving the safety of the loft, but he knew that Jim would be with him the whole time, and he couldn't stay hidden from the real world indefinitely. He summoned up a smile, and asked if he could check through the cupboards to see what he would need for a lasagne, which he knew he could manage easily enough.

"Sure, Chief, knock yourself out," said Jim happily. It was good to see Blair pottering about the loft, already obviously feeling more relaxed and at home, and also thinking positively about everyday actions. Perhaps it wouldn't be as hard as he had imagined for them to grow into a fully-functioning sentinel / guide pair in the PD environment. He admitted to himself that, seeing how badly traumatised Blair had been just a few days ago, he hadn't held out much hope of them working together in the near future, if ever, although he had had no intention of ever letting the boy go. Humbled by the young man's resilience and love for his Sentinel, Jim looked up to see Blair standing in front of him with a shopping list in his hand.

"Finished already, Chief?" he said, holding out his hand for the list and scanning it quickly. "Looks good -; perhaps we can drop by Blockbuster on the way back and pick up a couple of films to watch tonight." Smiling happily, Blair nodded, and stepped naturally into the offered hug.

Breaking apart after a few moments, they fetched coats as the Cascade Fall was already slipping wetly and coldly into winter. Seeing that Blair's coat looked as if it had come from a thrift shop (which indeed it had) and didn't look very warm or particularly weather-proof, Jim lightly rested his hand on his Guide's shoulder.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Chief, but I really want to get you a decent winter coat," he said. "Boots too, I think," he added, looking at the ratty trainers on his Guide's feet.

"You don't have to, Jim, really. This is what I'm used to, and I can't pay you back."

Kissing the top of the curly head, Jim replied, "You don't have to, kiddo. After all, it's because of me that you can't work now. Besides which, if you're going to be tagging along with me from now on, I want to know you'll be warm while you're doing it. And I wouldn't want Joel and Megan to feel I'm not looking after you properly," he finished with a mock shudder.

Ducking his head, Blair whispered his thanks, even grinning a little at the humorous image an angry Joel and Megan cornering his Sentinel conjured up.

Having successfully defused any potential discomfort in the situation, Jim grabbed the keys to his truck, and they left the loft for their shopping trip.

Whilst Jim had never had any patience with shopping, only doing what he couldn't avoid, he was surprised at how enjoyable the experience was in Blair's company. Although still a little skittish, and with a tendency to jump or flinch a little at loud noises and pushy shoppers, Blair soon relaxed in Jim's protective presence, and began to chat about various topics such as the importance of organic farming, and the potential health hazards of too much red meat, animal fats and sodium. Jumping from topic to topic with such speed that Jim could barely keep up, Jim realised that it didn't matter. What did matter was that the young man was coming out of his shell more and more as his confidence in Jim grew, and the chatter provided a soothing background for over-sensitive hearing.

He looped his arm around Blair's shoulders; they finished with the grocery shopping, and headed for a clothes outlet store just over the way.

Knowing that Blair was still a little embarrassed to have Jim buy his clothes for him, Jim let him choose from the sales sections, so that, although good quality, the coat and hiking boots they settled on didn't cost too much, and the grateful Guide's unease at his protector's generosity was assuaged somewhat.

Finishing up by going in to the nearby Blockbuster Video shop, Jim picked out the newest Star Trek film, while the kid looked longingly at the Twilight movie. Raising his eyebrows a little, Jim was moved to say that he thought the film was supposed to be a bit of a teen 'chick flick', but noting the swift blush crossing the Guide's expressive face, he took it anyway with a surreptitious wink at the pretty girl at the till, who obligingly gushed with enthusiasm over the choices.

Heading back to the loft with their booty, Jim reflected that he'd never enjoyed a shopping trip so much, and happily looked forward to a future where shopping ceased to be a chore.

Arriving back at the loft with arms full of their purchases, Blair immediately started unpacking the groceries and putting them away, while Jim turned on the TV and channel-surfed for a moment before settling on a replay of the last Jags match which he'd missed due to the surveillance he'd been obliged to do for the Galbini bust.

Blair hung up his new coat, and began to prepare the lasagne, puttering around the kitchen searching for the appropriate pans and utensils, and obviously thoroughly enjoying the experience of having the free run of a decent kitchen.

Humming happily, he chopped garlic, onions and tomatoes, frying them off with the ground beef, and added a careful amount of herbs and condiments in deference to his Sentinel's heightened sense of taste. Leaving the meat sauce to simmer, he prepared white sauce and grated cheese, then came over to sit by Jim for a while.

Jim smiled as the smaller man cuddled up to him with a sigh of contentment, and they watched the game for a while, until Blair had to move to put the lasagne together and put it into the oven to bake.

While he did that, Jim put together a salad, and set the table, all the while almost drooling at the delicious aromas wafting around the kitchen.

The lasagne turned out to be as delicious as it smelled, and both men had hearty portions, something that cheered Jim no end –; at this rate his Guide should soon get back into the healthy weight range.

He made sure Blair was fully aware of his appreciation as they both set to with the clean up, then settled down to watch the films, Jim with a beer, and Blair with milk and meds, seeing as he wasn't allowed to have alcohol with the antibiotics.

Noting that Blair was drooping a little again –; after all, he was still far from being fully fit yet – Jim encouraged him to lie with his head on a pillow on Jim's lap.

Blair accepted with a grateful smile, and settled down to the wonderful sensation of sentinel fingers carding gently through his curls.

Jim put the 'Twilight' DVD on first, fully expecting to have to fight to contain his chuckles, only to find that the gentle escapism was, in fact, quite soothing, and suited their mellow mood.

About half way through the 'Star Trek' movie, though, Blair's eyes finally closed and he fell into a light sleep, soothed and protected by his Sentinel's touch.

Films over, Jim gently roused his Guide, and half-carried him to the bathroom where the sleepy young man did the necessary without really waking up. Taking the opportunity of this semi-conscious compliance, Jim quickly applied the antiseptic cream to his Guide's sensitive areas and led Blair upstairs to bed.

Stripped down to his underwear, Blair once again snuggled contentedly up to his Sentinel's large and comforting bulk, and drifted deeper into the Land of Nod.

The rest of the weekend passed in a very similar fashion, with both men growing more and more familiar with each other and more comfortable with their new shared quarters and relationship. Blair, although prone to flashbacks and uncertainty, was doing far better than Jim could have hoped for at their first meeting. Beneath the shy and fragile-looking exterior, there was a core of strength and determination in the young man which at times left Jim in awe. Added to that, the ever-growing attraction to each other meant that, although Jim held back from penetrating his Guide again so soon because of the still-tender and healing tissues, Blair was becoming far less gun-shy in terms of gentle, intimate touches. The bond could only continue to strengthen between them, and the sense of mutual love and belonging was a comfort to them both.

Monday morning arrived with an unwelcome call from the PD.

Simon, who had held back from contacting his best detective only with extreme self-control; knowing that the new pair was fully entitled to some down time; finally gave in to pressure and called to request that the pair report to the PD as soon as possible because the proceedings against the two accused Vice detectives needed to move forward. Both had been suspended without pay until the investigation was over, but both were fully aware that, if convicted, they would be looking at some serious jail time. Since it was Blair's testimony which could tip the balance against them, Simon desperately needed sentinel and guide to return to the PD. (Having said that, Simon himself was still more than a little wary of accepting a charge of guilt against two of his fellow Captain's men on the word of a crime lord's fucktoy.)

Jim took the call just as he and Blair had finished the breakfast clean up, and beckoned his Guide over as he listened to what Simon had to say. Looping his arm over Blair's shoulders in a now-automatic gesture, he asked his boss to wait a moment until he had checked with his partner. He could almost feel Simon's aggravation and impatience emanating from the handset, but had no intention of answering before checking on Blair's comfort level and willingness to comply. Covering the mouthpiece, he quietly asked Blair if he was happy to go in to the MCU, and, after receiving a slightly nervous, but definite affirmative, he told Simon they would be in later in the morning.

Thanking Jim in a noticeably grudging tone, Simon hung up and prepared for the next stage in the proceedings against Mancuso and Davidson.

Replacing the handset, Jim met Blair's worried gaze, and offered a ruefully apologetic and understanding smile.

"I'm sorry about this, Chief, but look at it this way –; at least it'll get the whole mess over with sooner rather than later."

"I know, Jim, and it's not that I don't want to do the right thing, but I'm afraid that my testimony isn't going to be enough. Not everyone is as accepting as you are, and I'm still a sex-slave and victim in most cops' eyes. What happens if they don't believe me?"

"Chief, it's not going to happen," Jim replied firmly, knowing full well that there would be other sentinel pairings present. "Even if both of us were suspect, it would only take other neutral sentinel senses to confirm our honesty, and, if I say so myself, I have some pretty good street cred as an Alpha!"

Still nervous, but trusting in Jim's confidence, Blair nodded his acquiescence and followed the Sentinel to the door.

Their arrival at the PD this time was a slight improvement on the previous two, probably because Blair was dressed a little better (He had on a decent top coat and shoes over old but well-fitting clothing) and also because word had gotten around regarding Jim's jealous protective attitude towards his new partner. There were no noticeable unfriendly or adverse comments directed at the couple, until they neared a group of Vice cops waiting to board the elevator. Unable to avoid using the same car without appearing to display either anxiety or antipathy, Jim and Blair had no choice but to step in, but Jim immediately moved to the back of the car, and placed himself uncompromisingly in front of his slightly trembling partner.

Refraining from overt hostility and comment by the sheer animosity oozing from Ellison, who was in full Blessed Protector mode, the other cops contented themselves with a few unfriendly glances at the pair, and a noticeable closing of ranks in the presence of the MCU Sentinel Detective and his rather unconventional new Guide.

When the elevator stopped at three, the floor for the Vice Department, the cops exited, taking their animosity with them. Blair, buffeted by the negative emotions, leaned weakly against Jim's back, trying to regain his equilibrium before they arrived at the MCU. Able to do nothing else, Jim simply pulled the slender body to him, and rubbed soothing circles on the still bony back until Blair's trembling subsided a little.

By the time they had reached the doors to MCU, Blair was more in control of himself, and smiled gamely, if a little shakily, at his Sentinel.

Barely having time to acknowledge the greetings from H, Rafe, Megan and Joel, the pair were summoned to Simon's office with the usual bellow.

Greeting them with a barely polite nod of acknowledgement, Simon advised the pair that the Board of Enquiry was re-convening in the Conference Room down the hallway, and he would be obliged if his Sentinel Detective and Guide would accompany him there immediately.

Saddened and bemused by his erstwhile friend and captain's stiff attitude, Jim pulled his Guide close and followed Simon to the Conference Room. The set-up was as before, only with Captain Sullivan as a notable absentee. The others greeted the pair with varying degrees of warmth, but with no noticeable animosity. As before, the Sentinel / Guide Department Director Kingsley took it upon himself to start the proceedings, which more or less repeated the statements of the previous meeting, only this time with a much more focussed attention directed at Jim and Blair in particular.

Blair did his utmost to ignore any negative thoughts coming his way, but by the time he had finished giving his statement, he was relying heavily on Jim to buffer the worst for him. Finally winding down, he sank heavily to his seat, and unconsciously leaned in to Jim; an action which was totally expected and accepted.

After hearing Jim's testimony and that of Tony DiLuca, the Board dispersed to seek out coffee and the restrooms as needed after agreeing to re-convene in half an hour's time.

"How're you doing, Chief?" Jim enquired gently, fully aware of the minute tremors running through his partner's thin frame.

"I'm OK, Jim, but I need to use the bathroom –; by myself, man," he added as Jim prepared to accompany him. "Please, Jim, it's just that I need to do this myself because I'm sure everyone here thinks I can't even pee without having you to hold my hand. Please don't be mad at me."

"Sure, Chief," said Jim, although he wasn't at all happy about it. He fully recognised his Guide's need to act independently, but couldn't shake a feeling of unease. Nevertheless, he nodded his agreement, and told Blair that he'd go grab some coffee in the meantime and would meet him back in the Conference Room.

Blair made his way to the restrooms, trying hard not to feel small and vulnerable, and pushed open the door with a sigh of relief when he found it unoccupied. Pushing into a cubicle, he took care of business, and exited to wash up, when the door opened to admit the figures from his worst nightmare.

Mancuso and Davidson, here to attend the enquiry, had spotted their accuser alone and unprotected heading for the bathroom, and made the most of the opportunity. Davidson stepped forward, intentionally crowding the youngster against the far wall, while Mancuso locked the door behind them.

"Hey, look what we have here," Davidson murmured menacingly. "A second chance to enjoy G's little fucktoy. God, I'm looking forward to this. He was real sweet, wasn't he, Mancuso? Remember how he couldn't get enough of us, huh? Wish the night could have gone on and on...."

"Yeah," answered Mancuso, his expression cruel and lascivious. "Perhaps if we make it good enough for him, he'll get a little case of amnesia, I'm thinking." And with that he stepped forward quickly and grabbed Blair by shoulders, quickly spinning him around so he could hold the young man tightly from behind, and yanking his shirt down by the collar, providing Davidson with an unchallenged opportunity to grope his victim at will. Davidson reached out and, twisting and pinching Blair's nipples, growled into his ear.

"One word from you about us and Kobyoshi and you and your precious Sentinel are toast. This is what you'll do," he continued, dropping his hands down to Blair's zipper, ready to lower it and grasp the youngster's genitals. "You're going to deny the whole thing -; admit to being drugged - and that you imagined our part in it in order to get yourself out of trouble. Yeah, that's what you'll say," he purred, grasping Blair hard enough to hurt.

Crying out in pain as sharp nails gouged the soft skin of his belly, and terrified almost out of his mind, Blair responded the only way he could, by shouting his denial out loud whilst pushing all his fear and hatred outward towards his attacker. He was totally unprepared for the result, which had Davison flying backwards to slam against the wall, hitting his head on the counter's edge with a sickening thud as he went down. Horrified, Mancuso let go of Blair as he felt something akin to an electric shock course between the young man's flesh and his hands. He backhanded the boy, splitting his lip, then flew to his partner's side to see how badly he was injured.

At that moment, Jim, having picked up on Blair's panicked heart rate and frightened scent, barrelled into the bathroom, bursting open the locked door. He was closely followed by Simon, who had been behind Jim in the break room when the Sentinel went on the alert. Grabbing Mancuso, Jim threw him at Simon to take care of while he rushed to his Guide's side. Blair was huddled on the floor, arms round his head, and shaking from head to toe in reaction.

"Oh godohgodohgod" the kid was muttering. "I didn't know, truly, I didn't know!" he cried brokenly. "Oh god, what did I do?"

Aware that the rest room was crowded now with other personnel trying to check on Davidson and taking Mancuso into custody, the latter now screaming about 'murdering freaks', Jim pulled his Guide to his feet and took him to the nearest interrogation room for a measure of privacy. Sitting on the nearest chair, he pulled his unresisting Guide onto his lap, where the terrified young man clung to him as if trying to burrow under his Sentinel's skin.

Jim catalogued his lover's fear and pain, sentinel touch locating bruising to arms and chest, noting with a growl the pinched nipples and with rising fury the sight of a bite mark on Blair's right shoulder.

Since he could also pick up the faint tang of blood from the scratches on Blair's abdomen, he knew without doubt that Blair needed to be checked out by the forensics team to record the

evidence of the attack, as did both Davidson and Mancuso, so there would be no question as to who the victim was.

Rocking Blair gently and whispering reassurances to the devastated guide, Jim looked up sharply as H poked his head round the door, but didn't enter the room fully, as common sense told him that approaching a sentinel in full Blessed Protector mode was bordering on suicidal.

"Jim," he said quietly. "Just wanted to let you know they're transporting Davidson to Cascade General now. It doesn't look good, I'm afraid. How's the kid?"

"Just make sure they get the skin scrapings from under that bastard's fingernails –; the DNA'll match Blair's," came the growled response. "They should swab Mancuso's mouth too –; he bit my Guide," he continued, pulling the torn collar aside slightly so H could see the bloody teeth marks on Blair's shoulder.

"Will do, Jim. I'll make sure of it," H said, wincing in sympathy. "Tell Blair to take care," and with that, he ducked back out of the room.

Some minutes later, Jim heard the EMT's pushing Davidson's gurney along the corridor. He fervently hoped that H would get the samples as requested, although he knew that the outwardly happy-go-lucky man was a good detective, and wasn't likely to mess up something as important to the safety of MCU's resident Sentinel / Guide pair.

A little later still, when Blair had calmed slightly, Jim pushed him back a bit and spoke quietly to him. "Chief, we have to get you checked out and photographed. I'm sorry that it's yet another upset for you, but we need to have all the evidence we can to make sure there's no question that you were the victim here. I'll stay with you, I promise, but would you rather have it done here or in the Sentinel / Guide unit at Cascade General? I really think the hospital would be better for you –; not so traumatic, and they can check you over at the same time. How about it, babe?"

Still watery-eyed and trembling, nevertheless Blair was able to nod in agreement, and whispered, "I'll go the hospital if I have to Jim, but do you think Dr Stevens will be able to see me? I don't want any more strangers gawking at me."

"I'm sure it'll be OK, Chief. If he's not on duty, I'll bet we can call him in. Let's go now while the evidence is still pretty fresh." He could have bitten his tongue at the apparently callous statement, when he saw Blair's flinch and embarrassed blush. Thinking that further comment would probably only make things worse –; (Stop digging, Ellison) –; he gently slid the Guide off his lap until Blair stood unsteadily before him. Standing himself, he tucked the shaky young man under his arm and opened the door, looking for potential confrontations with personnel that he wanted to avoid.

Reluctantly recognising that his Captain was one such obstacle, he was relieved to see the corridor clear, so quickly hurried his charge to the elevator before anyone could stop them.

Down in the parking garage, Jim helped Blair into the passenger seat, and set off for the hospital, ruefully thinking that in the bare few days they'd been bonded, his Guide had probably seen more of the hospital than the PD.

Once again entering the Sentinel / Guide Unit, the nurse at the Reception nodded helpfully when Jim asked for Dr Stevens.

"Yes, he's on the ward at the moment, so he shouldn't be too long. I'll page him to make sure he's aware that you're here. If you'd like to take Guide Sandburg to the cubicle at the far end there, I'll fetch a gown and a plastic bag so you can keep the clothes for evidence."

A little surprised at her forethought, Jim thanked her and led Blair to the cubicle she'd indicated. Only a couple of minutes later she was back, bag and hospital gown in hand, although she didn't attempt to enter the cubicle without the Sentinel's specific permission. "Dr Stevens is on his way now," she said with a smile, and backed out into the corridor.

"I guess it's obvious that I've been attacked again, huh?" whispered Blair dispiritedly. "I'm going to get a reputation as a real wuss at this rate," he sighed. "Or potential victim material."

"No Chief, that you aren't," countered Jim, needing to offer comfort and support. Privately, though, he reflected that the Guide might just get a reputation as a trouble magnet.

Helping Blair out of his clothes, he hissed in fury at the new marks on the soft skin. The poor kid just didn't seem to be able to get a break. Taking a deep breath to calm himself down, knowing that the empath was well aware of his strong emotional response, he eased the gown over the thin shoulders, taking care not to brush the oozing bite mark. Blair climbed tiredly on to the gurney, just as Dr Stevens coughed discreetly from the curtained entrance.

"Come in, Doctor. Thanks for agreeing to see Blair. He's had enough of strangers poking at him, and wanted someone he'd been seen by before."

"I completely understand, young fellow," replied Stevens sympathetically. "I just wish it wasn't so soon, though, eh?" So saying, he pulled on latex gloves and took the tray of appropriate instruments so he could take the forensic samples first.

Gently swabbing the bite mark, he also did the deep abdominal scratches, and checked Blair's own fingernails, even though Blair hadn't had his hands free at any time to do any of his own scratching. "It's negative evidence" the Doctor explained. "Just as important as positive evidence in a way, as it proves that you *didn't* have a chance to retaliate."

"Well, not like that anyway," came the whispered reply from Blair. "It seems as if I don't have to use my hands now."

Puzzled, the Doctor let the cryptic comment lie for now, but knew he'd be asking about it later.

He continued with the check up, cleaning and bandaging the bite and the scratches. He gave Blair a tetanus shot, and took Polaroid photos of the new bruises before declaring Blair as fit to leave, but to apply the antiseptic cream to the bite mark and scratches for as long as needed. He then told them that they were good to go, and said that Blair could have a shower, but to try not to get the bite too wet.

Helping Blair into another set of scrubs, which looked a little odd with the new hiking boots, and taking the bag of clothing, Jim slipped a supportive arm around Blair's waist. Thanking the Doctor, they made their way slowly back to the truck.

When they were seated, Jim spoke gently to his Guide. "Link with me now, babe. I need to be able to understand what happened so I can back you up." Sighing, Blair raised wounded eyes to meet his Sentinel's crystal blue gaze, and concentrated on trying to pull his unruly emotions into some sort of control before gently entering Jim's mind.

After a few minutes of exchanging information and mutual support, Jim took a deep breath. "Wow, Chief," he exclaimed, his awe apparent in his tone. "I've never known anything like this before. My best guess is that you've always had latent high status Guide capabilities, but when you came online after the kidnap, bonding with me has released an even higher ability. I've got a nasty feeling that the Sentinel / Guide Department is going to want to do some studies."

"No, no, please Jim! I can't be a lab rat -; please! I'll try never to do it again, I promise! PLEASE don't let them have me...!" Blair's terror was heart-breaking to witness, causing Jim to act quickly to assuage his Guide's distress.

"Whoa, hush, Chief. I'm sure it won't amount to anything like that," Jim replied soothingly, although he wasn't totally convinced himself of the truth of that statement. What he did know for sure was that there wouldn't be any unpleasant experimenting on his Guide as long as he had breath in his body.

Blair calmed a little, his trust in Jim complete. He asked if they would have to go back to the PD now, or if he could take a shower first, he felt so violated and dirty again.

Jim agreed, thinking that another PD trip could wait until Blair was once again clean and wearing his own clothes, so they detoured via the loft where Jim wasted no time in stripping them both down so he could tend to the fragile young man's injuries himself. He deliberately kept his ministrations non-sexual for the time being, as Blair now had yet another bad memory to process, and after drying them both off, he made a fresh pot of coffee while Blair a little shakily pulled out more clothes, just as well-worn as the first set, and dressed carefully, mindful of his new hurts.

A cup of coffee and a cuddle later, the pair set out once again for the PD.

Blair was quiet and introverted during the drive, and Jim glanced over at him worriedly, knowing that his partner was beating himself up unnecessarily (in Jim's opinion) about acting to defend

himself, and consequently discovering that he was capable of what might even prove to be a potentially lethal power. Having seen deep into his Guide's mind, Jim was well aware of the young man's gentle nature and non-violent beliefs, despite all the hurts that had been visited on him during his short life. He also knew there was little point in his trying to get Blair to verbalise his thoughts and fears for the moment, since it was obvious he was going to have to spend some serious meditation time to try and get to grips with the new concept and its consequences.

When Jim pulled up again in the PD parking garage, Blair took a deep steadying breath, and, glancing over at his Sentinel, murmured, "I'm ready, Jim." Locking gazes with the slightly trembling but determined young man beside him, Jim was once again overcome by a feeling of love for and pride in his plucky Guide. Nodding firmly, he got down from the cab and walked round to give his partner a helping hand, as it was apparent that he was stiffening up again despite the pain meds Jim had managed to get into him back at the loft.

This time when they entered the MCU bullpen, they hardly had time to move towards Jim's desk when Simon Banks' bellow stopped them short. Once again cringing a little at the angry tone, Blair tucked behind Jim's back and tried to make himself look as insignificant as possible.

Once inside Simon's office, the door had barely closed when Simon rounded on the hapless pair. "I've spoken to Sullivan in Vice, and Davidson died without regaining consciousness," he started straight in. "I want your Guide down in booking a.s.a.p. for printing and processing...."

The reaction was two-fold and immediate. With a pained moan of pure grief, Blair folded in on himself and sank to the floor, where he huddled in a small, rocking ball of misery. On the other hand, Jim, coldly furious and not about to take any prisoners, answered his captain in a low tone that portended a far greater threat than an out-and-out shouting match could have.

"No, Captain, *sir*," he snarled. "You know yourself that Blair was the victim –; Jesus, man, you saw the state of him in the restroom after those two bastards had assaulted him!"

"Yes, I did," came the unrepentant reply. "And I also saw a body on the floor and your Guide the only one there who could have caused the injury. If he's innocent then there's nothing to worry about, is there?" he finished smugly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Unsurprisingly responding to the man's obduracy with corresponding aggression, Jim answered back, the volume of his comments rising as his sentinel-driven protectiveness burgeoned.

"This is bullshit, and you know it, Captain. What's your problem? Is it because Blair has been raped and violated so you don't think it's appropriate for me to bond with him? Well, that's a bunch of crap, *Captain!* I don't care if your feelings are hurt because he doesn't meet with your approval. *My Guide, Captain, mine!*

"And another thing; I took him to the Sentinel / Guide Unit to get checked over and the Doctor there took full forensic samples and Polaroids, and I've got his statement verifying that Blair was obviously attacked by those two. By now H should also have the skin samples from Davidson's fingernails and a swab from Mancuso which will prove without doubt that my Guide was scratched, bitten and bruised by those bastards, as well as being sexually assaulted."

Looking slightly deflated, Banks backed up a bit, but wasn't giving in without a fight.

"All that's as may be, Ellison, but there's still the question of that 'kinetic power' or whatever it was that the kid used. The Director's going to need to do some testing there. When I spoke to him a few minutes ago he said he hadn't heard of a projecting empath in the Pacific North West for decades. The kid really is a freak, Ellison, and you'd do well to break this bond while you still can."

"For the last time, Captain, the bond is set, and is stronger than anything the Director has heard of in his time at the Department –; his words, not mine –; so no, I couldn't break it even if I wanted to, and I *don't!*"

"And I'll thank you not to keep disparaging my Guide by referring to him as a 'kid' in that sneering tone. He's twenty one and legal, and already has more academic qualifications than we have put together!"

With that, he turned his back on the seething Banks and crouched down to take hold of the rocking, devastated young man huddled on the floor at his feet.

"Oh gods, he's dead, I killed him!" Blair was saying over and over. Looking up at Jim's face, blue eyes filled with despair and self-disgust, "I'm so sorry, Jim. So sorry. Please don't let them take me; don't let them lock me up. I didn't mean to, I just wanted him to stop!" And he dissolved into tears, throwing his arms around Jim's neck as if afraid the Sentinel would move away from him in disgust. Holding him close, Jim stood up and guided Blair to the nearest chair, where he sat with his Guide once again in his lap, face buried in Jim's neck, trying to block out the world.

Having heard the raised voices from the office, Joel knocked lightly and entered to see what the fuss was about. Seeing the state of the young man in Jim's arms, and the simmering fury on the Sentinel's face, Joel set himself out to mediate between Ellison and Banks to try to defuse the alpha dog pissing contest that was obviously taking place, with the hapless Guide in the middle.

"Look Simon," he said calmly, "I don't know what's going down in here, but I came to tell you that H is back from the Forensics lab, and he's already dropped off the samples Ellison wanted from Davidson and Mancuso. If those," he added, nodding towards the bag of clothing and photos Jim had dropped by the door, "are what I think they are, there won't be any problem with proving that Blair was acting in self-defence. Mancuso has been talking up a storm too –; ranting on about how Davidson should have killed the little bastard but that he wanted another taste of him first. The only other question is that of how the Sentinel / Guide Department want

to handle the discovery of a new projecting empath, but I would hope that they'll use some tact in handling Blair owing to the seriousness of the situation."

The look on Banks' face was thunderous, but he knew Joel was in the right, and his faint opportunity to break up the unlikely pairing was fast slipping away.

On the other hand, Jim was manfully hauling back on his desire to let the primal sentinel in him loose and tear Simon limb from limb for his verbal and emotional attacks on his Guide. After a few tense moments, and a gentle touch from Blair, who, even hurting as he was had no intention of leaving his Sentinel unguided, Jim relaxed minutely.

"Thanks, Joel. That's good news. It's good to know that there won't be any trumped-up charges against Blair," this uttered with a sideways glare at Banks. "If Blair's willing, we'll drop by the Department now, to see just what they have in mind. I'd rather get it over with for Blair's sake, so he can begin to heal."

"OK, Chief?" he whispered in Blair's ear. "Let's get it over, shall we? The sooner it's done, the sooner we can get home, babe."

Knowing that a visit to the Sentinel / Guide Department building was probably the last thing his Guide wanted to do, Jim was relieved when Blair didn't fight him on his decision, but nodded slightly against Jim's shoulder. He stood with Jim, and straightened up a little, but couldn't look at the others in the office, even though he could easily feel Joel's sincere sympathy. The sheer animosity directed at him by Banks on the other hand was enough to make him press his face into Jim's shoulder, even as the Sentinel's comforting arm wrapped around his waist, and he was pulled in close and tucked in to Jim's side.

Nodding to Joel, but ignoring his captain completely, knowing full well that one more thoughtless word from that source would lead to a full primal challenge, Jim quickly exited the office and MCU.

As the Sentinel / Guide Department was less than a block away from the PD, Jim elected to walk, partly to give Blair a little while longer to try to regain some sort of balance. However, even shielded physically and mentally by the Sentinel from passers-by, Blair was shuddering with a mixture of trepidation and reaction by the time they pushed open the main doors, such that the young woman at the reception desk, a sensitive herself, moved forward swiftly to wordlessly point the pair towards a quiet room immediately off the foyer.

Leaving them in the hushed, low-stimulus environment to make themselves comfortable in the plush overstuffed sofas, she called up to the Director's office and rapidly appraised Kingsley's secretary of the situation. Less than ten minutes later, Adam Kingsley himself knocked gently on the quiet room door, and peered in at the visitors. He could tell immediately that the Guide

was in a bad way, rapidly heading towards emotional meltdown as he overloaded on guilt and fear.

"Sentinel Detective Ellison," he said softly, addressing the primal sentinel in deferential tones. "Perhaps you would like to take your Guide to a bonding room for a few hours? We would be honoured if you would make use of the facilities we can offer you."

Jim responded with a sharp nod of acquiescence, and, literally lifting his Guide in his arms, he followed Adam to a bonding suite further down a corridor at the back of the building. Adam opened the door, then stepped aside, prepared to give the pair the utmost respect and privacy. He left them with a quick smile, and closed the door behind them.

When the Sentinel was sure they were alone, he directed his attention solely on the young man in his arms, first settling him on the soft bed in the corner of the room. He knew that Blair might well be shy of any sexual touch right now, and understandably so, but he desperately needed for them both to reconnect fully for the sake of the sanity of them both, so he stripped Blair as gently as he could, swiftly following suit, and joined his Guide on the bed.

Sensing Blair's panicked withdrawal, Jim pulled the trembling body close until he was spooned up tightly behind the Guide.

"Look, babe, I know it's all too much right now, but we need to reconnect, Blair. I swear I'm not going to penetrate you -; you aren't ready for that again yet - but I just want to make you feel good so the bond'll kick in. You *know* we need this, babe."

Receiving no reply, but no denial either, he went with his instincts and began to stroke the small body with gentle, non-aggressive movements, until he began to feel Blair relax incrementally under his touch. Trying hard not to hurt the sore spots, or dredge up unwanted feelings of violation, he tuned his senses fully on his Guide's responses, and was finally rewarded with a slight hardening of the lax penis. Gently reaching round to take it in his hand, he was stopped in his tracks by his partner's timid entreaty. "Please, Jim, I can't. Please don't be angry with me, please. I love you so much but I'm so scared..."

"Oh baby, I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. I *know* you're too sore, and I honestly didn't intend to penetrate you, sweetheart. Didn't you hear me just now? But we need to connect, babe, you know we do!" Turning in his arms, Blair sought the comfort of a kiss, instinctively trusting his Sentinel not to progress it further than he wanted, now he had expressed his fears. Jim was happy to reciprocate, and kept the kiss gentle and unthreatening, even though the primal sentinel within wanted to push his Guide down and nail him to the mattress.

No longer fearing pain and domination, Blair tried valiantly to let go of his fears and was grateful to feel the beginnings of arousal and a deep-seated need for his Sentinel's claiming. Jim responded in kind, using the utmost control over his demanding instincts to keep all

touches unthreatening, gentle and loving rather than passionate. He was rewarded by the feeling of his Guide gently humping his leg and moaning softly against the skin of his throat.

"I want to touch you again, OK, love?" he whispered, and was further rewarded by a tiny nod and kiss against the hollow of his throat.

Needing no other encouragement, he took hold of his Guide's gradually hardening penis in the most unthreatening touch possible, stroking oh-so-slowly until Blair wailed softly and came over his hand. It was enough to send his way over-stretched feelings into overdrive, and he followed suit mere milliseconds later, and the bond sang between them, comforting, nurturing and supporting in a golden burst of light and understanding.

It was around 6 am the following morning when Jim woke again after several hours of healing sleep. Turning his head slightly, he looked at the face pressed against his chest. Blair was still asleep, but not particularly peacefully it would appear, judging by the minute twitches he was making, and the frown between his brows.

Jim noted with dismay the dark shadows like bruises under the closed eyes, which almost matched the colour of those on his cheek and chin from Mancuso's blow. His lip had scabbed over, but was still sore and puffy-looking. However, Jim, although well aware that he was somewhat biased, still considered Blair's face to be the most beautiful sight in his world.

Painfully aware of his bladder protesting, and feeling itchy and uncomfortable from the dried semen on his groin and belly, Jim slid carefully from the bed and made his way to the adjoining bathroom, which he was pleased to find fully stocked with sentinel-friendly toiletries, fluffy towels and even two soft robes hanging on the door. Taking care of business with a sigh of relieved pleasure, he decided to have a quick shower and shave, then, donning one of the robes, he moved to the intercom on the wall beside the door. Speaking quietly so as not to wake his lover, he connected with Reception, and was answered by a friendly female voice wishing him a good morning and asking how she could be of assistance.

Realising that he was ravenous, which was hardly surprising in view of the fact that he and Sandburg had had nothing since the cup of coffee at the loft the previous afternoon, Jim requested coffee and pastries for two, and asked if they could be provided with either fresh clothes or have their own cleaned. Finally he asked if the Department could provide some more of the dressings and antiseptic ointment required for Blair's injuries, since they had arrived with just what they were wearing, and the truck was still in the PD garage. The cheerful voice replied that the breakfast and medical supplies would be with them in about 15 minutes, and that she would bring along fresh scrubs for them both to wear while their clothes were washed and dried. Thanking her, Jim turned from the intercom to see that Blair had roused, and was kneeling on the bed, hands stretched out towards him. His complexion was pallid, and the eyes

were wounded and deeply unhappy as he said, "Jim, man, why are we here? I'm scared –; please let's go home, please!"

Stung with pity and also a feeling of guilt and responsibility for creating the whole situation, Jim for once responded with uncalled-for but understandable irritation, which dissipated the moment the words left his mouth.

"For Christ's sake Sandburg, just suck it up! We're here because we have to be, so stop whining!" he snapped, then looked on in horror and self-disgust at the effect his cruel words had on the young Guide.

Blair's face took on a look of total devastation, wide eyes filling with tears as he shut down and curled up into a ball on the bed. "Knew you'd get sick of me –; I'm too dirty. A freak and a killer," he whispered brokenly and began to sob as if his heart was breaking.

"Oh shit, babe! I'm sorry," Jim hurried to his side and pulled the unresisting bundle into his arms. "I didn't mean it –; well, I sort of did, but I didn't think you'd react like this. Surely you can tell I love you? But I am only human, love, and even Superman gets angry sometimes...."

Taking a deep breath to try and calm himself down, Blair sniffled, then murmured, "I'm sorry, Jim. I know you didn't mean to upset me, really, it's just that I'm having such a hard time believing that you won't get fed up with me 'cos I'm a head-case, and likely to stay one for a long time."

"Yeah, but you're *my* head-case!" was the reply, which provoked a tiny giggle and watery sniff.

Pushing Blair away from him a little, Jim continued, "I ordered breakfast, which'll be here shortly, so why don't you have a quick shower now? You're a little ripe there, Chief".

Nodding his agreement, and wanting to do anything to please his Sentinel, Blair hurried to the bathroom and after using the commode, he turned on the shower and was about to step under the spray when he caught sight of himself in the mirror. He gazed at the battered reflection staring dolefully back at him, incidentally realising that he hadn't really *seen* himself, except for the occasional brief glimpse in passing, since his kidnapping.

He was disturbed by what he saw. His eyes looked ancient and full of dark secrets, while his cheekbones looked more prominent because of his weight loss. The hair was longer than he was used to wearing it, although not really quite long enough to tie back yet. Worst of all was the tattooed chain encircling his throat, and he raised his wrists to gaze sadly at the matching ones there. He didn't hear Jim come in, but looked up to see his reflection behind him, as the man stepped forward and pulled Blair gently back to rest on his chest.

"There's nothing there which is your fault, Chief," he murmured, "And nothing about you is anything but beautiful to me. Your face will heal quickly, and you can cut or grow your hair, whatever you like. You'll put on weight eventually with some TLC, and we'll deal with the 'head-

case' things as they occur, OK?" He finished with a gentle kiss near the spot where the bite mark was, deliberately not thinking about, or mentioning the many scars on the rest of his lover's body, or the awful tattoos.

"Come on, babe, let's get you cleaned up so we can grab some breakfast."

When they left the bathroom, both now wrapped in the snug robes, the young receptionist was waiting for them with a trolley laden with a fresh pot of coffee, a good range of breakfast pastries, fresh orange juice and a small selection of dressings and ointments. She had even provided today's newspaper, and after collecting their clothes for cleaning, pointed out two sets of scrubs and slippers for them to use in the meantime.

Thanking her for her kindness, Jim moved to the trolley, while Blair graced her with a shy smile and quiet, "Thanks."

Smiling in return, she left them in peace to enjoy the first excellent cup of coffee.

Perhaps an hour later, after they had eaten their fill, finished the coffee and juice, and attended to Blair's bites and scratches, they changed into the scrubs. They were both feeling much more human, although Blair's anxiety was only barely being contained.

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of Adam Kingsley, who was accompanied by Scientific Officer Gerry Larsen. A glance at the latter had Blair backing away in terror, as visions of laboratories and experiments flashed through his fertile mind.

Growling in irritation at the two arrivals, Jim swiftly reeled in his Guide, and held him protectively while glaring at the tactless intrusion.

Hurriedly moving to defuse the situation, Director Kingsley sent a quelling glare at his companion, who actually was looking greedily at the young Guide, then addressed the pair with hands held out unthreateningly.

"Jim, Blair, I'm so sorry for upsetting you like this. It certainly wasn't my intention, and there really isn't any need for worry, Blair. We honestly have no intentions of performing any type of intrusive or unpleasant 'Dr Frankenstein' style experiments on you, my boy. That really isn't what this meeting is about. Perhaps we can all sit down comfortably and I'll explain what the tests involve?"

With that, he seated himself on the sofa furthest away from the door, in an overt gesture to imply that the Sentinel's escape route remained unimpeded. Indicating that Dr Larsen should sit beside him, he waited until Jim and Blair settled on the opposite sofa, thighs and shoulders pressed close together, before beginning his explanation.

"Firstly, Blair, let's make it quite clear that we don't regard you as a freak. Although we're excited that you appear to be the first projecting empath to be reported in at least two decades, you are rare but *not* unique. The genetic variations that create sentinels and guides are

completely normal, as you know, and you simply have an extra, also normal, variation which enhances your abilities even more. In your case, your exceptional ability may have remained dormant even after your empathy came on line, but I feel, as does Gerry here, that perhaps it took bonding with an alpha sentinel like Jim here to switch it on, so to speak. Even then, it's quite likely that you would have remained unaware of it had you not undergone a traumatic event such as the attack at the PD. Whatever the explanation, son, you are *not* a freak; just a very gifted young man." Looking at the pair, and seeing some relief and a lot of interest in their combined gazes, he continued.

"What we propose, Blair, is to conduct some tests and run a few scans to try and determine the strength of your power, if at all possible, and to measure to what extent different stimuli can affect you. The whole point of the exercise is to try and give you some confidence in your control so that you aren't in a permanent state of anxiety that you're going to react inappropriately at the wrong moment. Your ability is a gift to embrace, not to fear."

Seeing Jim's nod of approval, and feeling the gentle squeeze to his thigh, Blair let out a deep breath and daringly read the Director's aura, relieved to find that the man was sincere. Trusting in his Sentinel's instincts and the results of his own empathic reading, Blair nodded and whispered in reply. "Thanks for explaining everything to me, sir. I know I probably seemed to be over-reacting, but I actually haven't studied guide abilities that much; only where it affected sentinel performance. I didn't even know I had guide genes as I only got tested in March, and I hadn't had the results before I got snatched. I guess I panicked after the attack, but I still didn't mean for the detective to die, sir, truly I didn't."

He was comforted to feel Jim's arm loop around his shoulders, and was even more relieved when Adam was quick to reassure him. "We know that, son. It was a tragic accident, but one brought on by himself, sad to say. You can't be blamed for a mental 'push' any more than if you had pushed him physically in the cause of self-defence.

"One other thing though, you say you hadn't been tested until this March. Can you tell me how it is that you failed to have the routine tests at five years and ten years as the law demands?"

Ducking his head, Blair mumbled something about his Mom.

"Speak up, babe," directed Jim kindly. "That might work for Sentinel hearing, but I don't think they can hear you over there." He tried to keep his tone light so Blair wouldn't feel intimidated, but it was obvious to all that his Guide was deeply embarrassed.

"I didn't really go to school when I was travelling around with Naomi, my Mom, because we didn't stay around in one place for long enough," he explained. "She didn't really believe in the power of the State, so she made sure we stayed under the radar as far as tests were concerned. I only had the genetic test done because I felt that it was time I know for sure if there was a sentinel out there who needed me. She'll have a cow when she finds out I've bonded to one of the pigs," he finished, only half-jokingly.

Peeking up at his Sentinel from beneath his eyelashes he added for Jim's ears only, "I'm sorry, man, it's just the way she is. She goes on protest marches and stuff."

"S'OK, Chief," replied Jim, although he had to squash down a strong flash of resentment towards the woman he had yet to meet. "Not your fault; and at least we're together now as we should be."

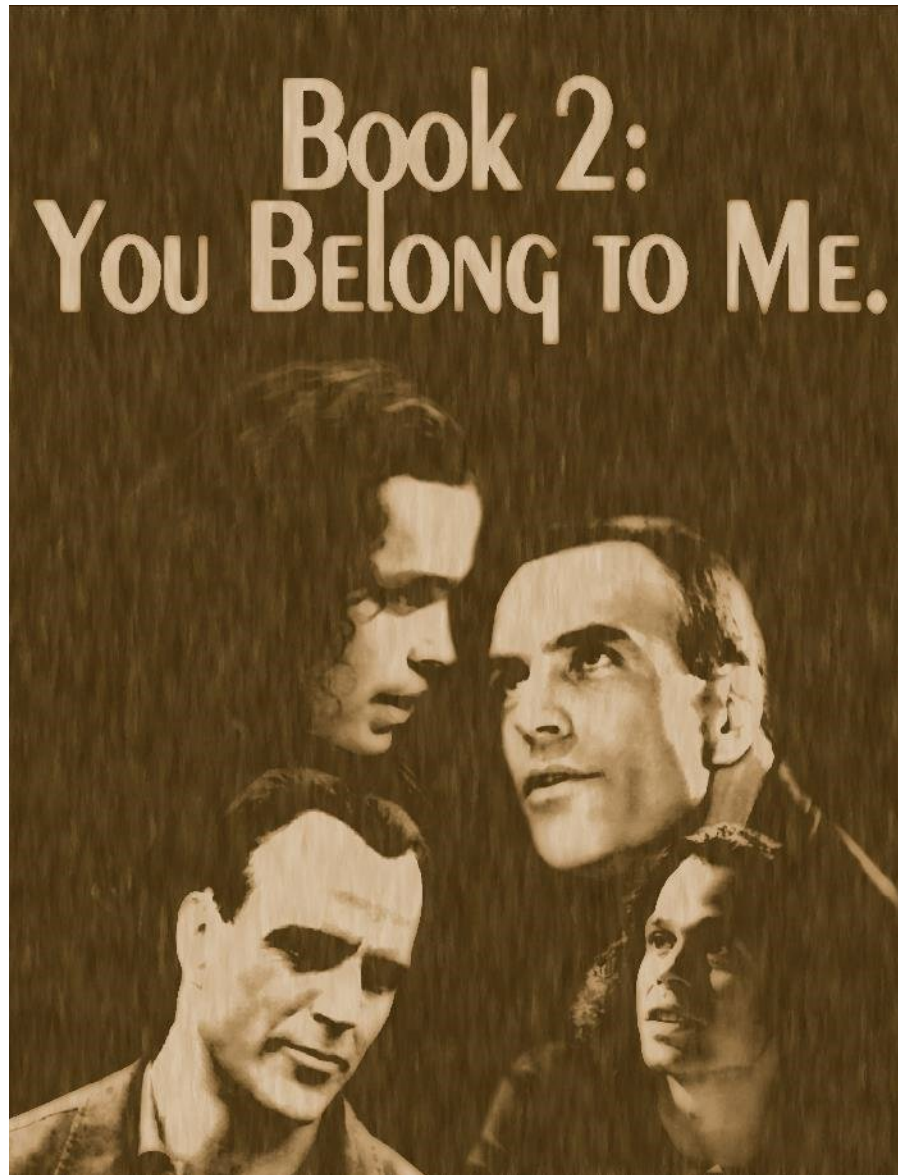
Nodding in agreement, Adam proposed that they adjourn for an hour or so, then meet down at the testing centre adjoining the department. He was happy to explain exactly what tests Blair could expect to undergo, and stressed that he was confident that they could be completed within a few days. Assuming correctly that Jim would be staying with his Guide for the duration, he also suggested that Jim contact someone at the PD to explain the situation and to go to the loft to collect any necessities they felt the Department couldn't provide. He added that they might prefer to use Department clothing, at least as far as Blair was concerned, as it was easier to get in and out of scrubs (and the occasional detested backless hospital gown). Once left alone again for the time being, Jim pulled Blair into his arms for a reassuring cuddle.

"Well, Chief, what do you think? It doesn't sound so bad –; no lab rat type testing and no scalpels involved. You could really benefit from the control exercises as well, huh?"

Still a bit apprehensive, but much more settled in his mind, Blair looked up at Jim and replied, "You're right Jim, and I'm sorry I went off like that. I think I can cope with an MRI or two, and I do need to know more about this power and how to control it. Maybe if I can get a real handle on it, it could turn out to be useful to you in our partnership –; that is, if you still want a partnership..." he tailed off, a little unsure of his presumption.

"That's one thing you should never feel you need to ask, baby," replied his Sentinel, smiling down on him gently. "This partnership's going to be the best thing that ever hit Cascade and the Cascade PD."

And Blair believed him.



You Belong to Me

It was several days later when Jim and Blair were released from the Sentinel / Guide Department, with Blair having undergone an in-depth health check, mental evaluation and numerous tests to attempt to understand and delineate the extent of his new guide abilities. As the first projecting empath to be recorded in at least thirty years, he was considered to be a highly prized individual in most circles, but it was an unfortunate fact that in others, particularly amongst unenlightened *mundanes*, it was more than likely that he would be treated with even more suspicion than 'normal' sentinels and guides. Because of this, and because of the trauma already suffered by the young Guide since his rescue by and bonding with Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison, although his release carried the blessing of Director Adam Kingsley of the Sentinel /

Guide Department, it was also conditional on the young man's continued improvement in the care of his new Sentinel. However, far from being irritated by the implication that his Guide might be under threat, Jim was actually very pleased and relieved that the Department's protective attitude mirrored his own, and provided him with a conspicuous amount of backup should the pair come under unbearable pressure in the future.

As he tucked his Guide in to his side in an action they both found comforting and natural, he smiled fondly down at the young man, saying, "Hey, Chief –; freedom at last, and not a Dr Frankenstein in sight!"

He knew Blair had been terrified on first entering the Department that he would have to undergo intrusive and gruesome experimentation to discover the source of his abilities, especially as the unexpected 'kinetic energy' he had been found to possess had led to the accidental death of the Vice detective, Barney Davidson, in the midst of an attempted sexual attack on the young man.

Blair smiled shyly at his Sentinel, and ducked his head as he felt a slight blush flit over his face, which it often did when he was wrapped up in thoughts of Jim, his lover and protector. "I'm so glad to be going home," he whispered, loving how that sounded to him, as he had never had the real thing before during his short life. He felt a warmth spread through him at the thought of his little 'office' under the stairs, where Jim had put all his books and papers and which was awaiting a small desk and bookcases to join the old but comfortable futon already there.

He smiled to himself as he recalled how Jim had hung up his Master's Certificate, with genuine pride in his Guide's accomplishment, and had to swallow hard against the lump in his throat which arose at the emotion he felt both for his beloved Sentinel, and his mentor, Dr Eli Stoddard, who had so kindly boxed up his possessions and kept them safe for him during his captivity as Galbini's slave.

So much had happened in the short two weeks or so since Jim had found and rescued him. He was still upset at the death of Detective Davidson, and he knew only too well that it would take a long time until he could come to terms with his actions, but the tests he had undergone at the Department had given him some confidence that he could control his abilities, at least under normal circumstances. Practicing the meditation techniques with which he was already familiar would stand him in good stead; but he tried not to think about *abnormal* ones, because that only led to turmoil and anxiety.

As Jim had left his truck in the PD garage when the pair had walked to the Sentinel / Guide Department building, he had had to contact Joel Taggert to ask if the kindly detective would go to the loft to collect clothing and other items for use during their stay, although, as Director Kingsley had suggested, Blair had continued to wear the scrubs and gowns provided by the department's Medical Research Centre whilst undergoing the various scans and tests.

On the other hand Jim had preferred to wear his own clothing when possible; although he was only too happy to accompany Blair to all the tests he was able to, wearing the appropriate attire when necessary. However, not surprisingly there had been some individual personal counselling sessions to be undergone, when he was forced to kick his heels in impatience until he could be reunited with his Guide.

Joel had also been happy to bring the truck round to the Department parking lot, so Jim and Blair wouldn't have to go into the PD for another few hours; time during which they could seek some measure of equilibrium and get settled back into the loft.

Gently ruffling the young man's hair, Jim opened the passenger door of the truck and threw in the small duffle containing their few extra items before putting a hand under Blair's elbow to hoist him into the seat. Blair was improving all the time health-wise, and had begun to eat reasonably well during their stay, but he was still underweight and sore in places where there was deep bruising, even though the worst of the bites and scratches he had suffered had begun to heal nicely. He smiled his thanks at his Sentinel, and buckled the seat belt ready for their return to the loft.

The short drive back was taken in congenial silence, with each man wrapped in his own thoughts, but with the link humming between them, providing mutual support and comfort.

When Jim pulled up outside 852 Prospect and turned off the engine, Blair turned to look at him fully, and held out his hand. Jim cradled it in his own, and looked questioningly at the young man, who seemed to want to speak, but was unsure of how it would be received.

"Hey, kiddo," he said encouragingly, "Don't be afraid to speak out. I know it's still early days, but you're getting better all the time, so just go ahead and spit it out OK? I can't promise I'll never get mad or impatient, but I'll certainly try not to."

Ducking his head again, then straightening up with touching resolve, Blair said, "I just wanted to tell you how much it means to me that you stayed with me during the testing, and how much I truly appreciate you taking me home with you. I love the loft, and I love you, and I hope I can live up to your expectations of me."

Jim was overjoyed at this speech –; not only was it one of the longest his young Guide had managed so far, but he felt gratified that the growing feelings he had for Blair were reciprocated. As far as Jim was concerned, Blair would never again know what it was to be homeless and rootless. He already had plans as to how they could manage their new life together in order to try and achieve the maximum potential of which he was sure their partnership was capable.

Pulling gently on the hand he was holding, he tugged Blair over to his side, and cuddled the smaller body close. Feeling the joy and relaxation rolling over him from his Guide's mind, he smiled somewhat smugly to himself before pushing them apart after long moments.

"Welcome home, Chief! Let's go see what we've got by way of groceries so you can do some more experimenting on me for dinner."

A little later, after a surprisingly tasty (and enterprising) casserole put together by Blair out of the few ingredients he found in the refrigerator and kitchen cupboards, Jim settled them both on the sofa in front of the TV to relax for a while before bed. As they sat comfortably, absently watching a Jags replay, Blair shifted a little to turn towards Jim, needing to discuss an important issue that had been worrying him.

"Jim, I know you said you didn't mind buying things for me, and I really appreciate it, truly, but will I ever be able to pay you back? I never looked into how the Sentinel / Guide partnership functioned from a practical point of view. I mean, I didn't even know I *was* a guide, and I don't want to be a constant drain on you."

Jim looked at him thoughtfully, and decided this was as good a time as any to talk about their future and what it could mean in terms of employment.

"OK, Chief, I'll tell you all I can, as much as I understand the situation, anyway. But first of all, I assure you that you are no 'drain' on me as far as I'm concerned. However, I think you'll find that things aren't as difficult as you might have believed anyway.

"As far as I know, as soon as the formal announcement is made by the Sentinel / Guide Dept about our true bond and partnership, (which should be any time now), you will get a small expense account to cover incidentals and basic necessities.

"Once we return to the PD, you'll have to be appointed as a civilian consultant so that we can work together, which will also provide you with a small salary. I know it'll seem pretty paltry, but it's better than nothing, and you may eventually be able to do some research or something at Rainier, so you really don't need to feel beholden to me."

Blair was taken aback by Jim's information. It was more than he could possibly have imagined, and far more than he had ever had as a struggling grad student. With a huge smile breaking over his face, he virtually climbed on Jim's lap to hug him with all his might.

"Oh Jim, that's wonderful! I've never had much money apart from grants. That's why I had to have all those extra jobs in bars and such to make ends meet. I never thought I'd get paid for being your partner -; it's like the icing on the cake, man!"

Jim responded in kind, cuddling his armful of Blair close, while inordinately pleased at the young Guide's joyful reception of his news.

"It's no more than you deserve, kiddo. No, actually, you deserve more for getting stuck with me..." and then he had to duck a playful swat to the head.

"Hah! Now you've asked for it!" he continued with an evil chuckle, and set about tickling the body wriggling in his arms. He hadn't even considered what the reaction might have been if Blair had taken the mock 'attack' in the wrong way, but afterwards he was delighted that Blair had merely dissolved into fits of giggles before crying "Uncle!" because his ribs were aching from laughing so much.

It felt so good just to horse around, that they both ended up grinning happily at each other. However, at that moment, Blair surprised himself by yawning hugely, and felt the sudden onset of the tiredness which still plagued him.

"Time for bed, young 'un," said Jim with a smile, and standing, he pulled Blair to his feet.

"Do you want to have a quick shower before bed?" he asked. "I could do with one if you want to share."

He was pleased when Blair nodded sleepily, and leaned into Jim's supporting arm to head for the bathroom. Jim left him to take care of business while he collected clean tees and boxers for them both, and then stepped into the bathroom himself to turn on the shower.

He found that Blair had already stripped down to his boxers, and was waiting a little shyly for his Sentinel to come in. Stripping down quickly himself, he helped Blair off with his underwear, and handed him into the shower. Stepping in himself, he started matter-of-factly soaping up his Guide, automatically adjusting his touch to accommodate still sore areas, and being carefully unthreatening when reaching Blair's genitals and tender bottom.

This was the one somewhat problematical facet of their relationship that he completely understood, but with which he couldn't help feel some frustration. Although they had fully bonded once, with him penetrating his Guide, it was only because they had both desperately needed the connection under very trying circumstances, and hadn't really taken account of Blair's still very sore and scarred passage at the time. Not only that, but Blair was still unsurprisingly skittish about overtly sexual touches or approaches; hardly surprising after the months of abuse he had undergone. It was with real astonishment then that Jim felt his Guide's gentle touch first washing his broad chest, then shyly reaching lower to soap up his cock, which immediately decided to join in the fun.

Taking hold of his Guide's shoulders, remembering the last time the kid had tried to go down on him, obviously believing it to be his duty to service his rescuer; he tilted Blair's face up, to find wide blue eyes looking back at him –; eyes filled with love and determination.

"Please, Jim, let me love you," he said softly. "I'm OK, really. I *want* to pleasure you!"

And with that he sank gracefully to his knees, and worshipped Jim's large and very happy cock. Unsurprisingly, it took a very short time until Jim came with a moan of deep satisfaction, and, once his legs had stopped feeling like they were going to give way at any moment, he raised the young man to his feet to check for himself that Blair really was OK with what he'd done. He was relieved and enormously happy to find Blair smiling up at him calmly and, truth be told, a little smugly, before hugging the stuffing out of him.

Steering them both out of the shower, and wrapping his Guide in a soft towel, he quickly dried himself before helping Blair dry his curly locks.

After applying the antiseptic ointment to Blair's various healing hurts –; a chore with which the young Guide was getting more and more relaxed – Jim steered them both to bed, where he tucked Blair under the covers.

He had fully intended reciprocating with gently loving his Guide, but since Blair had fallen straight to sleep, he settled for cuddling up close and watching over the peaceful face until finally dropping off himself for a long and healing rest.

The following morning, Jim awoke to the tickling of Blair-hair under his nose, where the curl-covered head was tucked into his shoulder. Grinning a little, he eased the sleep-heavy body down a bit so he could breathe freely, then, succumbing to temptation, and thinking about the boy's spontaneous love-making in the shower, he began to stroke the pliant body with gentle touches. At first, Blair seemed to be enjoying the attention, gradually rousing to wakefulness under his Sentinel's ministrations. Suddenly, however, as Jim's fingers slid below the waistband of his boxers, Blair shot upright with a startled cry, and pushed away from Jim, only to stop short and cringe in horror at his reaction.

"Oh, please, don't hurt me –; I'm sorry, so sorry..." and within the space of a single moment he was back to the traumatised slave so recently rescued from Galbini's clutches.

"Whoa, Chief, it's OK! I'm sorry; I didn't mean to startle you. I wasn't thinking. I just wanted to give you as much pleasure as you gave me last night. If you don't want it, it's OK, really," and he held out his hand unthreateningly to the trembling figure.

A few moments later, and blushing with embarrassment, Blair lowered his gaze, and sighed deeply. "I'm so sorry, Jim. It just took me by surprise, and I guess I had a flashback. They used to come for me at any time, see. I never knew when I'd be wanted, or what I'd have to do. It was worse when I was drugged and the effects began to wear off before they'd finished with me..." and his voice tailed off as the horrible memories resurfaced.

Shifting over carefully, Jim gently took hold of the thin shoulders, and, when there was no adverse reaction, he pulled Blair into a gentle hug.

"I'm sorry, Chief, really. It's just hard not to have you close and not want to touch and love you. I'll try not to do anything you don't want."

Pulling back a little, Blair looked his Sentinel in the eye, although he was unable to hide the shame within his own eyes.

"It's not that I don't want to have you touch me, honest, Jim. I love you, I really do. But please could you give me a little time? I DO feel OK about making love, but I have to be ready. I just can't seem to turn off the bad memories. Gods, I hope I'll be able to sometime...."

"You will, sweetheart, eventually," came the gentle reply. "I know it's hard for you, and I'll have to try harder to control myself. I'll try not to take you by surprise again, kiddo."

Blair looked away, then back at Jim. "You're so good to me –; so understanding, I really don't deserve it," he murmured softly. Then, with a slight full-body shake, he continued more firmly, "Is it too late to take you up on your offer, or have I blown it for you? I'd really like for you to touch me now, if you still want to."

Smiling happily, Jim was only too glad to oblige, and very slowly began to rub the soft skin of Blair's upper arms. "I'd love to, baby. I'm happy to do as much or as little as you want".

Taking his cue from the young man's shy smile and small moans of pleasure, he gradually continued with his touches until they were back at the point where the flashback had kicked in. At Blair's nod of assent, this time he slipped his hands beneath the material of his Guide's boxers, and slid them down over Blair's hips. The smaller man shifted slightly to accommodate him, then, when the underwear had been kicked off, Jim slowly lowered his face to Blair's groin.

Gently nosing and nuzzling for a few minutes until he felt that Blair was truly relaxed and OK with his actions, he took the slightly hardening penis in his mouth and sucked; gently at first, then with greater strength as he felt Blair react in growing excitement. Before too long, the young man was fully hard, and with an exclamation of, "Oh! Oh! Ooooooooooh!" he came with a rush, and collapsed onto the bed. Grinning smugly and licking his lips, Jim slid up the bed to take the boneless body into his arms.

"How was it for you?" he murmured, chuckling into a curl-covered ear.

"Amazing! Absolutely amazing...love you," was the tired reply, and Jim was highly amused when his exhausted Guide began to snore quietly in his arms.

About an hour later, both men had roused enough to slide out of bed and go down to the bathroom, which they entered hand-in-hand.

"I'm going to grab some clean underwear, Chief," said Jim. "Why don't you start the shower and I'll join you in a second."

Smiling, Blair nodded and did as he was asked after using the commode, and then looked at his reflection in the mirror as he rinsed his hands before having a quick shave.

When Jim returned with the clean clothing, he moved up behind Blair, and smiled at their combined reflections.

"You know, kiddo, your hair's getting fairly long now. Do you want to get it cut, or grow it out?"

Cocking his head to one side, Blair replied thoughtfully, "If it's all right with you, I'd like to grow it out. It's been a while since I wore it long, although I don't ever remember it being short when I was a kid travelling with Naomi."

What he was really thinking was that it would help disguise the hated chain tattoo round his neck, and it was always useful to be able to hide behind a curtain of long hair in embarrassing situations.

"That's absolutely fine with me," replied Jim, secretly pleased with his Guide's decision. Although he had had no intention of forcing his opinion on his still wary and submissive partner, he really loved the look and feel of the soft curls, which were a dark, rich auburn in colour, with red highlights in which he could lose himself.

"The cops at the PD won't expect me to cut it, will they?" said Blair, on an afterthought.

"Tough if they do," Jim answered smartly. "You're a civilian, so they have no say. If we like it, then it stays, OK?"

Blair smiled happily. "Thanks, Jim. I'd really like to grow it, then. Although it'll be a while until it's long enough to tie back."

"Sure, kiddo. By the way, I don't mean to ask out of turn, but I'd have thought you'd have had some chest hair there, Chief. You seem to have the beginnings of a bit of a pelt..."

He could have bitten his tongue at the tactless comment when Blair went quiet, and blushed before answering.

"Actually, it was getting fairly thick before Galbini took me," he whispered, pinkening in shame, "but he didn't like chest hair, so they used to wax it. Hurt like a son of a bitch."

"Oh Chief," murmured Jim, gathering him into a hug. "I'm sorry, kiddo. I didn't mean to upset you. I should learn to keep my big mouth shut!"

"It's OK, Jim, really. You shouldn't have to pussyfoot around me all the time. It's about time I started getting myself together. I wasn't always such a wimp."

Nodding encouragingly, Jim squeezed him once more, then they stepped into the shower where they washed each other down quickly but enjoyably before dressing and moving to the kitchen for some breakfast.

After a companionable meal of coffee, OJ, eggs and toast (and the last of Blair's meds) they cleared up and prepared to leave for the PD.

Blair had grown noticeably quieter as the time approached to leave, and Jim, understanding his reticence, but unable to do much about it, simply squeezed his shoulder encouragingly and led the way down to the truck.

Part 2: Blair is introduced to the Major Crimes Unit and his First Case:

Running his finger under the collar of the turtleneck sweater he had borrowed from Jim in an attempt to hide the tattoo on his neck, Blair kept himself to himself on the short drive, but Jim knew better than to try and distract him. He knew only too well that each trip to the PD thus far had ended in some type of unpleasantness, so the youngster could hardly be blamed for his nervousness.

On the other hand, there was nothing to stop him sending waves of comfort and support to his unhappy Guide through their link, so he did just that all the way through the drive, the trip to the elevator from the parking garage, right up until they pushed their way through the doors of the MCU.

They both deliberately worked on blocking the negative thoughts of some of the cops they met on the way (and sentinel hearing caught more than a few adverse comments) but there was also a gratifying number of supportive and cheery greetings too.

On entering the MCU, Jim immediately sent out his senses to record any potentially upsetting reactions from those present, and was relieved that there were only one or two darker mutterings from a couple of the uniforms there. Joel, spotting their arrival, moved to greet them with a huge smile of welcome, closely followed by Megan Conner, who looked as if she could eat Blair alive.

"It's great to see you!" "Oh Blair, you look wonderful!" they said almost simultaneously, and both held out their hands in greeting. Smiling shyly, Blair glanced up at his Sentinel (just to make sure) then moved forward to be hugged by both of the detectives in turn.

"Hey, what am I, chopped liver?" huffed Jim, secretly delighted with the honest pleasure in the scene. Smiling in his turn, he nodded at Rafe and H, who, although rather less effusive in their greetings, grinned and nodded cheerfully at the new arrivals.

Just then, Rhonda, Simon's pretty blond secretary, exited her office and hurried over. Plainly enchanted by Blair, she held out her hand to him, saying formally, "So pleased to meet you properly, Guide Sandburg."

Blushing furiously, Blair beamed at her in real pleasure as he shook her hand, and Rhonda fell in love even more. Exchanging looks with Megan, she and the other woman nodded in mutual approval of Jim's new partner.

Naturally, there had to be a down-side, which came when Simon, hearing the commotion in the bullpen, stuck his head round his office door and bellowed in his customary manner for Jim and Blair to come in to see him. Shrinking in on himself, Blair lost all trace of the happiness he'd shown during the greetings, and tucked himself behind Jim's broad back in an attempt to make himself as insignificant as possible. The reaction wasn't lost on the other detectives, who shot furtive, unhappy glances in their boss's direction.

"See you later, Blair, Jim," muttered Joel, patting Blair comfortingly on the shoulder in passing. The others nodded in sympathetic agreement, and returned to their desks in an attempt to look as if they were hard at work, while trying to eavesdrop on the coming confrontation.

Draping a supportive arm around Blair's shoulders, Jim steered him towards Simon's open door.

"You wanted to see us, Captain?" he asked formally.

"Sit down, Ellison. You too," this directed at Blair, with a less than welcoming expression. "I was about to call you to see if you ever intended coming back to the unit. It's been more than the recommended two weeks bonding leave, you know."

"That it has, sir," replied Jim stiffly, "But under special circumstances the Sentinel / Guide regulations allow for extra time to complete the bond, and our circumstances were nothing if not irregular."

"That's as may be," huffed Simon, "but it would have been good to hear if you were actually intending to return. I was wondering if I was going to have to transfer in a new detective. Captain Sullivan in Vice has had to get some new recruits, because Davidson and Mancuso weren't the only ones to leave the department under suspicious circumstances. Two others ended up implicated in the aftermath of the Galbini bust. Seems like there was quite a plot going on to share out his business and work with Kobayashi to establish a new criminal empire extending right down the coast."

Blair couldn't help but gasp in shock at hearing the names of his two attackers mentioned so casually by Banks. Ducking his head to hide his embarrassed expression from the Captain, and fervently wishing his hair was longer already, he was grateful for Jim's supportive grasp on his knee, and concentrated on his internal mantra -; 'I am relaxed, I am calm, I am relaxed' - until his breathing slowed and his heart rate settled back to something resembling normal.

Casting a concerned glance over his Guide, Jim asked if Simon had any new cases for him needing immediate attention, because, if not, he would take Blair down to Personnel to get his paperwork started.

Simon's response was terse and unhappy.

"No, I've kept your desk clear of all but few cold cases, since I thought that, even if you came back, you'd have to be on desk duty until *he's* cleared to go out in the field with you. You may as well go on down and get him sorted out." *If he can pass the drug test –; hippy freak!* he added under his breath, but not quite quietly enough to escape sentinel ears.

"Fine!" Jim snapped, and gathering Blair to him, he left the office without a backward glance.

As they left the bullpen after waving distracted goodbyes to the other detectives, Jim spoke up, his expression perplexed. "You know, Chief, you may not believe it yet, but Simon really was a good friend and captain before the Galbini situation. He just needs to get over my unexpected bonding, and get used to having you around."

"I don't think so, Jim," responded Blair quietly, a little wary of disagreeing with his Sentinel, but needing to explain what he had discovered.

"It's not just that he doesn't like me much –; I know I'm hardly what he would have chosen as a guide for you –; but he's angry and jealous. I can feel it," he added hurriedly to head off Jim's automatic denial. "I can feel that he loves you, but can't admit it to himself. He would have given anything to be your Guide."

Jim lapsed into silence, and reflected that, much as he didn't want to believe it, there was no way he could repudiate what an empath as talented as Blair could sense, and he knew instinctively that his Guide was telling the truth. Sighing, he settled Blair more firmly against his side and continued walking.

"It's OK, Chief. I believe you, but I hate to think he feels that way, and I just hope he can get past this for all our sakes. Because I have to say that as much as I value him as a friend, no one gets between me and my Guide. No one!"

They soon arrived at the Personnel Department, where Jim introduced his new Guide to Vera, the office manager. She looked a little askance at the young man, until he smiled shyly at her and held out his hand in greeting, at which she melted on the spot and handed over the necessary paperwork and regulation manual with a smile and nod of approval. Turning, she also retrieved a small cup which she held out to Blair, indicating that he provide a urine sample for the routine drug test. He took it, and headed off in the direction of the toilet nearby, while Jim waited at the desk.

"Congratulations, Sentinel Ellison," said Vera quietly. "He seems like a really nice young man. I hope you look after him properly," she added sternly, almost as if she was making sure he was caring correctly for a stray puppy.

Initially indignant, Jim smiled ruefully when he was ambushed by the mental image of Blair's huge puppy dog eyes. Even knowing that his reputation as a 'hard-ass' was going to stay with him for some time to come, he still couldn't bring himself to snap back at the prim woman behind the desk.

"Don't worry, Vera," he said placatingly. "I'm well aware that Blair is the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm going to take good care of him, I promise!"

Vera looked down quickly. She realised that she had come over as pretty critical, and had the grace to blush, but stuck to her guns nonetheless. Raising her head, she met and held Jim's gaze again, nodding firmly.

"See that you do, Detective Ellison!"

Just then Blair came back, holding the sample cup out for her to take. "I'm sorry it took so long," he said apologetically, "But I only went not long ago..." and was completely astounded when his audience dissolved into laughter.

"It's OK, Chief, really!" gasped Jim in between guffaws, "We weren't laughing at you, honest..." and he slung his arm round the slim shoulders, throwing a smirk back over his shoulder at Vera, who was still struggling to get herself under control.

'God', thought Jim, *'it's so good to enjoy something as simple as a joke and a laugh'*, and smiling down at his Guide, he ushered him into the small office next door where Blair began to fill in the myriad forms he needed to complete in order to become Jim's official partner on the force.

Nearly an hour later, Blair set his signature to the last of the forms, and took the booklet back to Vera, who smiled sweetly at him. "Welcome to the PD," she said warmly, and waved cheerfully as the pair left the room, tucked close together as always.

Knowing that it would take a couple of hours until Blair's official ID would be ready for collection, Jim suggested they took an early lunch, happily anticipating a quick visit to his favourite drive-thru Wonderburger.

Blair nodded his agreement, and climbed into the truck unaware of the delights awaiting him.

When they reached their destination, Jim turned to his Guide and asked him what he wanted, only to be taken aback by the incredulous look on the young man's face.

"Are you joking, man? Couldn't you just inject the fat straight into your arteries? This stuff is the creation of demons, man -; all set up to cause Heart Attack City!"

All Jim could do for a moment was open and shut his mouth wordlessly, then he grabbed his torso and curled up in hysterics at the indignant glare on his Guide's face.

"Jeez, kid, tell it like it is why don't you?" he wheezed between gales of laughter. "This is one of my favourite treats, Chief, but if you don't like it, we can go somewhere else –; some other time, that is!"

Blair, vacillating between worry that he had offended his Sentinel, and genuine concern for said Sentinel's long-term health, looked down at his hands for a moment before answering.

"OK, Jim. I'm sorry for coming over so heavy, man, but that sort of stuff really is bad for you. I just want what's best for you, honest."

"S'OK, Chief," replied Jim, finally getting himself under control. "I promise that we can discuss healthy options soon, but please can I order my burger now? I've been looking forward to this all day," he continued, with a convincing whine.

Blair responded to the joking tone, and answered with a not entirely fake scowl. "Just as long as it doesn't remain a habit, Jim!" he muttered, pleased when Jim took it in good spirit, and squeezed his knee in companionship.

So saying, they put in their order, with Blair going for the spicy beanburger with everything, and it amused Jim no end to see his supposedly health-conscious Guide tucking in to everything with gusto.

After they were done with the last morsel, Jim disposed of the trash, and they returned to the PD. They found that Blair's official ID was ready, and the young man clipped it to his shirt with a small but proud smile.

They entered the MCU to the cheerful greetings of the detectives still there, and Jim settled Blair in the chair he found placed beside his at his desk, certain that it was the work of Rhonda, who was apparently determined to make sure that his Guide should feel at home and welcome.

Sure enough, minutes after beginning to show Blair the various databases and official forms he would come across on Jim's PC, the pretty secretary arrived in person with a cup of hot chocolate which she placed before Blair with a smile. Before he could even stammer out his heart-felt thanks, Megan arrived the next moment with a plate of chocolate chip cookies, which she presented with a flourish 'just in case he should feel peckish later!'

Overwhelmed with the women's kindness, Blair was embarrassed to feel himself tearing up in gratitude, but was utterly amazed when neither of them displayed the least bit of disgust or offence, simply patting him on the cheek, and telling him to 'enjoy!'

Jim looked on with an indulgent smile on his face, happy to see that there were several members of the department who were willing to go the extra mile to make sure the young man felt accepted within the MCU.

The rest of the afternoon passed quietly, with Jim looking over the old case files he had been given, and showing Blair where to access specific PD sites for future reference. He was pleased to find that the young man was more than comfortable with computers, and Jim could see that he would undoubtedly be benefitting from his Guide's expertise and research capability for a long time to come.

By the time they were ready to finish for the day, Blair was feeling much more at ease with his surroundings and less awkward with at least some of the Major Crimes personnel. He smiled up at his Sentinel when Jim suggested he close down the programme he was studying, and they left together, Blair tucked into Jim's side as was now normal for them.

Waving goodbye to the few people left in the bullpen, Jim chuckled slightly when he overheard Megan's comment to Joel. "You know, I never thought I'd say this, but Jimbo's turned into a right mush-ball. I'd given up on him even acting bloody human!"

"Yep, that boy's already done him a world of good," came Joel's reply. "If only Simon would lighten up a bit, this partnership could turn out to be really good for the unit."

Reaching the elevator, Jim steered his partner into the empty car and took the opportunity to catch a quick kiss and cuddle. *'Mush-ball, huh?'* he thought. *'Yep, I think she might be right!'*

The next few days passed reasonably calmly, with only a couple of unpleasant moments for Blair when he had the occasional unavoidable brushes with less-than-welcoming cops. Nothing developed further than a few adverse comments, however, since everyone in the PD now knew of the depth of Ellison's feelings for his Guide, and also how much greater the range of his senses had become since their bonding. It was a brave or foolhardy individual indeed who would risk more than a dismissive glance at the young man, let alone attempt any physical contact.

Nevertheless, both men were getting a little stir-crazy with the continued desk duty. Blair was soaking up information like the proverbial sponge, and was rapidly showing signs of becoming a real asset to investigations, since he could swiftly assimilate the contents of a file and come up with workable suggestions or conclusions, even if they sometimes appeared to come from left field.

Jim was pleased and proud of his Guide's intelligence and perspicacity. Now they needed the opportunity to use their combined skills in the field; except that Banks persisted in keeping the partnership within the confines of the bullpen.

Things came to a head when Blair, who was scanning the case notes relating to an unsolved but possible domestic murder, suddenly peered at Jim over the top of his wire-rimmed glasses, which luckily had survived unscathed from being tucked into the side pocket of the backpack which Eli had stored for him amongst his other possessions.

"Hey, Jim," he said, raising a questioning eyebrow. "Did anyone check if the husband had recently started any study courses at the U before Mrs Delaney was killed?"

"Not that I know of, Chief," came the reply. "The guy had a fairly good, if not watertight alibi. He was working late at the office, according to his secretary at the time, and there was nothing more than circumstantial evidence linking him to his wife's last evening alive. The jury let him walk on the grounds of reasonable doubt. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just a thought, but the method used to kill the lady wasn't as random as the file makes out. I could be very wrong here, but the slashes the ME describes on her chest sound very much like a sacrificial pattern to me. I'd have to see the evidence photos to be sure though," he added with a shudder.

"Sure, Chief. If you're sure you're OK with that, here they are. But what did you mean about study courses?"

After gazing for some moments at the grisly evidence photos, during which his face grew noticeably paler and acquired a faintly greenish tinge, Blair sighed and put the pictures face down on the desk. Swallowing hard against the queasy feeling threatening to overwhelm him, he spoke thoughtfully.

"Well, Jim, the cuts appear to me to recreate a traditional ritual design of a Mayan sacrifice, where the victim was killed to encourage fertility in either an individual or the general populace. If Mr Delaney wanted kids, but wasn't having any luck, and he had attended the regular Summer School evening Anthro class I'm thinking of, he could well have gotten the idea from that. 'Course, it's only a theory..." and his voice tailed off as his confidence evaporated once again.

"Sounds like a good starting point to me," said Jim encouragingly, gathering up the file. "I'm going to run this by Banks and see if he'll let us follow up on your ideas. Can but try."

Jim had no intention of permitting an unnecessary confrontation between Banks and his Guide, so he left Blair at his desk and entered Simon's office alone.

"Well, Jim, what have you got for me?" asked Simon, obviously trying for an affable approach, which was made considerably easier for him without the unsettling presence of Jim's 'shadow'. The kid made him feel uncomfortable on several levels, some of which he really didn't want to look into too deeply in case he didn't like what he discovered about his own personality.

Although he knew he should be overjoyed that his friend had finally found a compatible guide, he hated the thought that in the first instance it wasn't him (and he would have loved the role, although in all honesty he knew his Guide capabilities were minimal), and secondly that not only was the boy truly beautiful, and apparently seriously clever, but he was also deeply damaged. Damaged in such a way that Simon couldn't see him ever being accepted in the PD, or, more to the point, by Simon himself; a fact that seriously worried him as he had always believed himself to be tolerant and broad-minded.

He put aside the cigar he'd been studying - one of his favourites which he was looking forward to lighting up as soon as he left the building - and grinned at his detective, eyebrow raised quizzically as he waited for Jim's answer.

"Well, Simon, it's the old Delaney case from two or three years ago. An apparent domestic murder which was never proven, although there seemed to be other factors according to the ME. Dan Wolf and the guys in Homicide thought it was pretty hinky, which is why it got kicked up to us. We've been going through it again, and Blair's had some really good ideas I think we should follow up on. I'd like to go back out in the field--"

And that's as far as he got before Simon growled, "What do you mean 'Blair's had ideas', huh? He's been here two minutes and he thinks he can investigate a case. Are you serious, Detective?"

Drawing himself up to parade rest, Jim's face settled into an expressionless mask. "Sir, yes, sir! I'm very serious. My Guide is a highly intelligent and educated anthropologist, and I believe he has the capability and intuitive insight to be a great asset to the department. Permission to carry on, Sir!"

Banks was furious, but, short of transferring the pair to another department, he had no solid grounds for keeping them tied to a desk any longer, so he nodded his agreement with a very disgruntled air. Pretending interest in the papers on his desk, he didn't look up again until he heard the office door close with a deceptive gentleness which spoke volumes about the Sentinel's simmering fury.

Slapping the file down on his desk, Jim turned to grab his and Blair's coats. "Come on, Chief, we've got some work to do," he snapped, aiming a swift glare over his shoulder towards the captain's office. Blair jumped to his feet with a worried expression on his face, hoping that Jim's anger wasn't directed at him, but fairly sure from the Sentinel's emotions reaching out across their link that he was at least partly responsible.

Knowing how much his Guide must be picking up from him, Jim did his utmost to calm himself down as they hurried out of the bullpen.

"Sorry, Chief," Jim murmured with a sigh of irritation. "I simply don't know why he has to make things so difficult. Even if it's true that he wanted to be my Guide -; and I'm not doubting your insight, Chief, honestly -; I would have thought him to be above this type of pettiness. If he could have come up with an acceptable reason for keeping us in the office, he would have used it. I think he's probably been getting some pressure from upstairs to get me -; us -; back out on the street where we can do the most good."

"It's OK, Jim, I understand. I'm just sorry that I'm the cause of the rift between you two. Perhaps it would have been better for you to have broken off the imprinting before it got too set..." and

he ducked his head, torn between gratitude that he had been chosen and guilt that his Sentinel should have had a better guide.

Correctly interpreting his Guide's emotions and train of thought, Jim said forcibly, "And that's enough of that, Sandburg! I wanted you then, and I want you now. Only you, you hear me? You belong to me, Chief, and don't you forget it!"

And slinging his arm across Blair's shoulders, they set off for the ME's office on the first stage of the new investigation into the murder of Abigail Delaney.

Reaching the door of the morgue, Jim tightened his grip on Blair's shoulder and drew him to a halt. He knew that it was very likely that there would be at least one autopsy being carried out, and he guessed correctly that his Guide wouldn't be too happy at being subjected to the grim reality of the Medical Examiner's domain.

"Are you sure you want to come in with me, Chief, because I can always ask Dan to come out here to talk to us when he's finished."

Taking a deep breath, Blair struggled to control his growing sense of unease, although he knew he had no chance of fooling his Sentinel even if his complexion wasn't getting paler by the second.

"I'm OK, Jim. Well, not really, but I guess this won't be the last time I'll have to see an autopsy, so I'll try not to embarrass you too much. It's not as if I haven't seen bodies before. They're just much older and not usually still juicy!" he finished with a shudder.

Jim grinned sympathetically at the small figure by his side, appreciating the youngster's attempt at lightening the situation for both of them.

"Fair enough, Chief," he said. "But if you feel it's getting too much, just give me the nod and we'll get you out of there."

So saying, he pushed open the door, and gently ushered his Guide into the lab complex.

The sight that greeted them did nothing for Blair's hard-won calm, since the ME was just completing an autopsy on a young man, who apparently had had a serious collision with some large and unforgiving object.

The ME, a large, middle aged Native American, spotted them and, after asking his assistant to finish up, turned towards the pair, stripping off his latex gloves as he approached.

"Hey, Ellison!" he greeted Jim effusively. "Welcome back to my domain." Then, turning his attention to Blair, he continued, "And is this the new partner I've heard so much about? Pleased

to meet you, young man. I'm Dan Wolf, Chief Medical Examiner," and he held his hand out in greeting.

Blair was thrilled with the man's pleasant and uncomplicated approach, so took the proffered hand immediately.

"Hi, Dan, I'm Blair Sandburg," he replied happily. "I'm very pleased to meet you. I know I'm pretty pathetic about viewing fresh bodies, but I'd love to talk sometime about older remains..." and then he suddenly shut down, when a flashback of being punished for speaking out of turn assailed him out of the blue.

Dan and Jim exchanged unhappy but understanding glances, and Dan immediately did his best to smooth out the unhappy vibes.

"Hey, not a problem!" he said jovially. "I'll look forward to it. But in the meantime, I gather from your captain that you want to talk about the slash marks on the chest of a victim from an older case?"

Taking the out that was offered, Jim replied, "Yeah, Dan. It was the Delaney case if you recall. Abigail Delaney was murdered in her own home, and was found with a badly slashed chest, but we couldn't pin it on her husband, who seemed the most likely suspect. But there were no other leads."

"Well, the body was eventually released for cremation when the husband failed to get convicted, but I kept the relevant photos in the file if you'd like to see them. I never was happy about the patterning, but had no real reason not to release her. The apparent sequence of the slashes could have been purely coincidental, or even a product of my own over-active imagination," and he chuckled and shook his head in gentle self-mockery.

Turning away, he headed for his small office, plainly expecting them to follow.

When Jim and Blair entered the cluttered space, Blair was enchanted by the many Native American artefacts scattered amongst the filing cabinets and bookshelves; so much so that he was able to relax again after his emotional slip-up.

Dan moved to an overstuffed filing cabinet at the back of the room, and after a moment or two came up with a thick manila file, from which he drew several photographs. Laying them down on the desk in front of the pair, he said, "This is what I meant by patterning. It seems familiar, but I just couldn't pin it down."

"Oh, my!" gasped Blair, who had taken a good look at the grisly pictures in front of him. They seemed far worse than the ones he had already viewed, and his queasiness was back with a vengeance. Nevertheless, he was determined to offer his opinion anyway.

"I'm pretty sure I know what these are," he murmured thoughtfully. "When I saw the photos in the MCU file, they rang a bell with me, but now I've seen the full autopsy images, I'm fairly sure

I know what this is. It's the Mayan fertility sacrifice I told you about, Jim. Either Delaney was truly fed up with trying for kids with Abigail and chose to get rid of her using a specific ritual for the hell of it, or he'd already got someone else in mind, so offered up her life for the possibility of fathering a family with this other person."

He was mightily relieved when both men nodded in agreement, rather than laughing him out of the room. Dan looked closely at both Blair and the pictures and said, "I think you're on to something there, young fella. It's not a culture I'm familiar with, but now you mention it, it does bear some resemblance to a mid-western Native American ritual I've come across before, only that one didn't involve the death of the chosen one, and the marks were painted on instead of cut."

"OK," Jim spoke up. "I'm convinced, Chief, especially since Dan here agrees with you also. Let's go and have a word or two with our friend Delaney."

"Um, Jim, do you think we could go to the U first?" asked Blair shyly. "It's just that I know the tutor who has been taking the Summer School's evening Anthro classes for the last few years, and she may have some information we could use," and he paused, blushing a little at his presumption.

"Great idea, Chief!" replied Jim warmly. "I can see a great future for you as a detective –; *and* my partner and Guide," he added for Blair's ears only.

Thanking Dan, they left the ME's office and headed for the parking garage, intending to arrive at the Rainier University campus before the close of office hours.

During the drive to Rainier, Blair brought up a subject that had been bothering him ever since they took on the cold case, although he was still wary of prying too much into his Sentinel's life just yet.

Taking a calming breath, he asked quietly, "Jim, is it OK to ask you something? I mean, about the case?"

Receiving a nod of agreement and eyebrow raised in question, he continued.

"I was just wondering why the case was given to the MCU rather than remaining with Homicide. I mean, I know there are some anomalies here, but I should have thought that it would have been passed over to the Sentinel / Guide pairing of Ralph and Stephanie Smithson. I'm sure they would have picked up on any hint of guilt on Delaney's part, even if they didn't know the significance of the cut marks."

"You'd be right, Chief, except that the Smithsons weren't with the PD at the time. They only transferred in later, a couple of years after me."

Blair sat for a moment with a thoughtful look on his face, then he asked diffidently, "Um...how many Sentinel / Guide pairings are there in the PD altogether, Jim? And when did they transfer in? If you don't mind me asking?"

"There's only two other pairs that I know of at the moment," replied Jim thoughtfully, "And they both work out of the Bayside precinct. I think they arrived shortly after the Smithsons, come to think of it. Why do you ask, Chief?"

"Well, it's just a thought, Jim, but it seems to me that it's no coincidence that they started to arrive after you came online. I mean, even unbonded, an alpha sentinel like you would be a strong draw...." He tailed off into pained silence at the mutinous scowl that had settled on his Sentinel's face.

"I'm sorry, Jim, truly, I didn't mean to annoy you!" he added contritely a moment later.

With a resigned sigh, Jim forced himself to relax a little. "S'OK, Chief. I know you just want to find out as much as possible about me and this whole sentinel thing. I don't blame you really, but I don't like it. I'm kind of a private person. I'd 've thought you'd have guessed by now!" he added ruefully, trying to lighten the atmosphere a bit, as he could easily see the mortified expression on his Guide's face.

Blair nodded, relieved that he hadn't upset Jim even more, but wondered if he dare ask Director Kingsley at the Sentinel / Guide Department for more information. He decided against it almost immediately when he caught the frown that still lingered on Jim's handsome face, and kept quiet for the rest of the trip.

When they pulled up outside Hargrove Hall, the building that housed Rainier's Anthropology Department, Blair already had a fair idea of which office they needed to locate if it was indeed still the same professor taking the Summer School class he had in mind. He therefore led the way up to a light and airy office on the second floor, with a nameplate reading 'Dr Charlotte Bristow' on the door.

Knocking politely, they heard a pleasant, deeper female voice call out, "Enter!" so, opening the door, Jim pushed his Guide gently into the room in front of him.

The professor standing behind the desk was an older lady, a little plump but fairly tall (taller than Blair anyway, Jim noted. He smirked inwardly as he glanced at his smaller partner, who stood barely five foot seven inches in his stocking feet.)

"How can I help you gentlemen?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at the proffered IDs.

Jim replied courteously, obviously charming the professor with his small smile and pleasant attitude.

"Dr Bristow, we're hoping we can call on your field of expertise to help us in the course of our enquiries regarding an older case we are investigating. It appears that a person we would like to question may have attended a Summer School Adult Education class in Anthropology on the subject of Mayan culture, and we'd be grateful if you could confirm this for us."

Head tilted to one side, she looked first at Jim, then at Blair. "I know you, don't I, child?" she said kindly. "Aren't you Blair Sandburg, Eli Stoddard's child prodigy? I think you came to my course when you first arrived, didn't you? Asked lots of pertinent questions, as I recall! What brings you here with the Detective?"

Blushing furiously, Blair stammered a confirmation, but was saved from further tongue-tied embarrassment by Jim's smooth intervention.

"Blair's working with me now, Dr Bristow, as he's my bonded Guide. I'm hoping that he'll have the chance to continue his studies in some shape or form before too long though." Then, business-like once more, he continued.

"Now, this person we're looking into was a Mr Albert Delaney. He would have attended your class about four years ago. Does the name ring any bells, by any chance?"

Dragging her attention back to the Detective, she nodded crisply. "Let me look at my database, Sentinel Detective Ellison. If this man came to my classes, I'll have it on the system," and she sat in front of her PC and entered a few key strokes. Scrolling down the pages, she finally grinned triumphantly.

"Yes, here it is! An Albert Delaney did attend the classes. I remember him now; an unobtrusive man who always sat at the back, but very interested in the whole subject of Mayan culture. And absolutely fascinated by the rituals. The bloodier the better, if I remember rightly. Asked a lot of questions, but not as many as young Blair here –; not as argumentative either!" she added with a wry but gentle smile, which caused Blair's blush to deepen even further.

Smiling indulgently down at his Guide's bowed head, Jim thanked the professor –"Call me Lottie!" –; and steered Blair towards the door, with Dr Bristow's cheerful farewell ringing in their ears.

Pulling Blair to him in a one-armed hug, Jim said, "Hey, Chief, looks like you were right on the nail with your suggestion! Now all we've got to do is figure out how it ties in with the case. Well done, kiddo!" and he squeezed the lean shoulder beneath his hand.

Blair peered up at him, blushing again, but this time in shy pleasure at the sincere compliment.

Returning to the truck, Jim took a moment to study the file before starting up, as he wanted to get Delaney's home and work addresses. The home address was in a nicer suburb at some

distance from the city centre, whilst Delaney's work place was near the docks, as he was now the owner/manager of the Castle Lumber and Shipping Company, Inc.

Deciding to try the home address first to get some idea of the Delaney life-style, they set out for the suburbs.

Blair stayed pretty quiet during the drive, still mulling over the alpha sentinel 'draw' that he was convinced was occurring, and also happily hugging Jim's compliment to him. He so wanted to be worthy of his Sentinel, and was determined to do his best as a partner at work as well as at home.

When they pulled up outside the well-kept two-story villa, they were greeted at the door by a pretty young woman, obviously pregnant, and holding a toddler in her arms.

After checking their IDs, she stood aside to let them in, and put the child down. The toddler, a small boy of around two years old, homed in immediately on Blair, who crouched down to his level. The young woman, who had introduced herself as Miriam Delaney, apologised and made to pick the child up again, but Blair smiled at her and offered to play with the little boy while Jim asked his questions –; a suggestion which went down well with both mother and detective. So saying, he settled down cross-legged on the carpet, and the toddler, Petey, climbed straight into his lap clutching a cloth book which he demanded Blair read to him. Blair happily obliged, knowing that the sound of his voice would help ground his Sentinel so that Jim could fully utilise his senses during the conversation.

It turned out that Miriam had been Delaney's PA before Abigail's death, and, although she truthfully stated that there had been no affair with her then boss, he had turned to her after his wife's murder, and she had fallen for him. They had married as quickly as possible after a short period of mourning, and she had become pregnant with Petey almost immediately. Carefully reading her physiological reactions as she talked, Jim's senses told him that she was telling the truth when she admitted that she had actually liked Abigail, and had commiserated with the older woman when the doctors told her that she was barren. According to Miriam, Albert was really supportive of his late wife, who was the only child of Ben and Mary Castle, killed together in a freak car accident. Ben Castle had started the business and left it to Abigail and Albert, who had taken the position of manager a few years previously, and then wooed and won the boss's daughter.

Everything was adding up just a little too well, Jim mused, especially when the talkative Miriam happily admitted it was her evidence that had provided Albert's alibi on the night of his wife's murder. According to Miriam, Albert was working late at the office, and was still there when she left at around 9.30 pm. Since the ME's estimated time of death for Abigail was between 9.00 and 10.00 pm, it seemed unlikely that Delaney could have gotten home in time to commit the murder. Even though under questioning Miriam had eventually been unable to swear as to the

exact time she left the office, and admitted that her boss wasn't in her presence the whole time, since she had a small side office, the defence had claimed there was enough reasonable doubt to acquit Delaney.

Thanking Mrs Delaney for her cooperation, Jim helped Blair to his feet, much to the disgust of Petey, who was apparently besotted with his new playmate, and they left the somewhat bemused young mother to drive to the Castle Lumber Company offices.

In the truck, Jim told Blair what he had sensed from the young woman, and that he was convinced she was innocent of any wrong-doing –; just a somewhat naive and trusting girl ripe for falling into Delaney's clutches.

Blair nodded, confirming that he also had felt no malice or deviousness in Miriam either. He added rather sadly that, if it really was a case of Delaney murdering his first wife, the fertility rite sure seemed to have worked well for Miriam.

"Yep, you can say that again," agreed Jim with a wry grimace. "Old Albert must be rubbing his hands with glee to have one son already and another kid on the way! Now all we've got to do is work on the time question, to see if we can fit him into the frame convincingly. I think the motive is pretty obvious after all. He gets the company and an heir or two to carry it on."

It was fairly late in the afternoon when they arrived at the company offices, which stood to one side of a large warehouse where the lumber was stored. Jim started sneezing as soon as they pulled up as he got a nose-full of pine scent from the freshly-cut logs, so that Blair had to spend some minutes talking him through dialling down his sense of smell.

"Thanks, Chief," he said feelingly, once his breathing was more or less back to normal. "I should know better than to take a huge sniff like that. Good job I've got you to sort me out, kiddo!" and he looped his arm round Blair's shoulders as they approached the office doors.

The interior of the suite of offices was clean but fairly sparsely furnished, with just the necessary office equipment and few frills even in the reception area. Delaney's office had his name in gold lettering on the door, and it stood to the right hand side of the main entrance. The reception desk and small rear office were directly in front of the main door, and Jim quickly saw that if the layout had remained unchanged since the murder, Delaney would have been spotted easily from the reception area, but that he could have left the building unnoticed if Miriam, as his then PA, had been busy in the small back room.

At this time in the afternoon, the reception area was empty, so Jim and Blair knocked and entered Delaney's office without delay.

The man in question was seated behind a large, fairly uncluttered desk, and he looked up in some surprise at his visitors. He hadn't changed that much from the 'mug shots' in the police

file. Tall, maybe Jim's height, and broad shouldered, he was beginning to run to fat, although he still looked strong and fairly fit. In his late forties, his thick dark hair was receding slightly, and greying at the temples, and his face was lightly tanned and handsome in a rather hard-featured way.

Seeing the ID held out in front of him, the half-smile of welcome swiftly changed to a glare as he rose to his feet. Blair felt immediately intimidated by the large presence and dark aura he could sense surrounding the angry man, and he moved closer to Jim's side and stepped slightly behind the Sentinel. Instantly aware of his Guide's nervousness, Jim moved even more in front of Blair to block Delaney's view, at the same time noticing that there appeared to be a fire exit in the corner of the room, partially hidden by tall filling cabinets. *'Yet another way the guy could have slipped out'*, he thought, and dragged his attention quickly back to the man in question.

"We're here to ask you a couple of questions about your wife's murder, sir, as it appears that there are a few new leads to follow up on. I'm sure you'll want to be kept up to speed on our enquiries?" he added, blithely ignoring the splutters of indignation his words provoked.

Changing tack abruptly, expression and tone deliberately quizzical, he continued, "What do you know about Mayan fertility rites, Mr Delaney? Do you think they helped Miriam at all? You're a lucky man to have such a fertile young wife. Did you enjoy the evening classes, by the way? The professor said you asked a lot of questions--" and that was as far as he got before the man launched himself at the pair with a howl of fury.

Too late Jim saw the heavy paperweight thrown at his head, and he went down, stunned as the object hit his forehead. Blair yelped and staggered back as his Sentinel fell at his feet, and stared wide-eyed at the raging man advancing murderously towards him, hands stretched out in front of him like claws. Terrified that he and Jim were going to be killed, he held out his hand in a warding gesture and pushed out with his fear and denial, to see Delaney stop dead and clutch at his head in consternation just before collapsing to the floor unconscious.

Barely giving Delaney another thought, Blair dropped down to stroke Jim's face, murmuring brokenly, "Oh, please be all right! Please wake up Jim, please!" Pulling himself together a bit, he grabbed Jim's cell phone in shaky hands and dialled 911. When he was answered, he stammered out, "O o o officer down! Send b b b backup, Castle's Lumber Company...Please h h hurry!" Then, dropping the phone, he went back to stroking Jim's face, and pleading quietly with him to wake up.

What seemed like hours later, although it was in fact only about ten minutes, he heard the first of the police cruisers pull into the yard, closely followed by an ambulance. "I i i in here!" he called out, not leaving his Sentinel's side.

Seconds later, two uniforms burst in, closely followed by H and Rafe. Blair was so grateful that it was someone he knew, and he gazed at them imploringly as he gasped out, "That man,

Delaney, threw a paperweight at Jim and knocked him out. Please look at him!" this last to the EMTs who had entered.

"Come on, babe," said H gently. "Move aside a bit so they can get a good look, OK?" He didn't attempt to pull Blair away completely as he was well aware of the mutual protective feelings shared by Sentinel / Guide pairs, so settled for crouching beside the distraught young man to offer his support while the EMTs checked Jim over.

Rafe in the meantime checked Delaney, who was moaning and trying to sit up. "Don't let him get us!" cried Blair. "He tried to kill us!" With a nod, Rafe cuffed the still groggy man, and pulled him none-too-gently to his feet.

"Take him downtown for booking," he told the uniforms. "We'll stay with Ellison and Sandburg."

Sending him a quick smile of gratitude, Blair turned his attention back to his Sentinel, who was being placed on a backboard prior to being loaded into the ambulance. Well aware of the protocols concerning injured Sentinels and Guides, the EMTs made no comment when Blair climbed in beside the gurney and held Jim's hand, murmuring continuously in an attempt to reach his unconscious partner.

The journey to Cascade General was accomplished swiftly, and the ambulance pulled in to the emergency bay. Rafe and H, who had followed behind, walked quickly up to Blair and told him they would get back to the PD to question Delaney and inform Simon of the incident. Blair nodded distractedly, and trotted off behind the gurney which was being taken to ER.

"Looks like the kid pulled his freaky power stunt thing again to protect Jim," said H, scratching his head and staring somewhat disconcertedly after the retreating Guide.

"Yep," replied Rafe. "It's certainly a useful trick to have up your sleeve, hey?"

"Just hope Banks is more appreciative this time around," answered his partner in a darker tone than Rafe was accustomed to hearing from him, and they returned to the car to follow up on the questioning of Jim and Blair's suspect.

What seemed like hours later to Blair, who hadn't ceased in his whispered pleas to Jim to wake up, Dr Stevens gently shook his shoulder to attract his attention.

"Well, young man," he said with a soothing smile. "The pair of you are determined to make me earn my keep, aren't you?"

"Oh, Dr Stevens, I'm so glad it's you...Jim got hit by a paperweight and he's been unconscious for hours...!" Blair's voice rose in a wail of distress as his fearful gaze sought Stevens' kind eyes, desperately needing the doctor's reassurance.

"Whoa, there, Blair, it's OK, son. I've been brought up to speed on the incident. Now we'll just make sure your Sentinel's head is as hard as I believe it to be." And with that, he gently touched the injured man's forehead, and felt the good-sized lump already in place.

"We'll be taking Jim down for a head scan shortly, but I think you'll find that he's already coming round."

As he finished speaking, there was a low moan from the gurney, and a mumbled "blaiiiir, where aaaare youuu?"

Blair reached around the doctor, and grasped Jim's hand again, peering worriedly into his Sentinel's bleary blue eyes.

"Oh man! Oh Jim, you had me so scared, man. I thought he'd killed you...I'm *so* sorry! It's all my fault...!"

"Huh? Just how'd you figure that, Chief?" came the laboured response.

"It was me who came up with the fertility idea! If I hadn't, you wouldn't have been at Delaney's office, and Delaney wouldn't have gone nuts and attacked you--"

"Whoa, Chief," said Jim, slightly more aware now, but suffering from a splitting headache. "Police officer, remember? Goes with the turf, kiddo. Now, either talk me through the pain dials again, or get the good doctor to give me something for the headache, and we'll get out of here."

"Not so fast, young man!" said Dr Stevens sternly. "Before we get to kick you two out onto the street again, I'm going to order a head scan for you to make sure there's no real damage. You'll have a concussion for sure, so I'd prefer to keep you in overnight. Ah, ah aaah!" he continued, cutting off any potential argument. "Young Blair here can stay in your room with you, so you've no need to worry on that account. I dare say your Captain Banks will be here shortly to check up on you, so let's get this show on the road and get you down to X ray. Coming, Blair?" And he moved off without waiting for another word of complaint.

With nothing left to do but to follow the doctor's orders, Blair walked alongside the gurney as an orderly pushed it to the elevator. As they walked, he whispered instructions to Jim to help him dial back on the pain, and the resulting relief was plain to see on Jim's face.

"Thanks again, Chief. You're getting plenty of practical experience today, if nothing else!" And then was saddened to see the fear and shame flit across the young man's face, as if he had been the cause of everything.

"Stop that right now!" he muttered sternly. "You will NOT blame yourself, and you WILL congratulate the pair of us for getting a guilty man arrested, OK?" And with that, he dozed off naturally, still holding Blair's hand.

After a couple of head scans (which Jim slept through) they were taken up to a private room in the Sentinel / Guide ward, where Jim was made comfortable on a better-than-usual hospital bed. A cot was brought in for Blair, along with clean scrubs to change into, and sentinel friendly toiletries for their use. Dr Stevens left after checking his still sleeping patient's vitals, but not before quietly comforting Blair, and telling him not to worry. He also arranged for some food to be brought in for the pair of them once Jim woke again.

Meanwhile, back at the PD:

Rafe and H high fived each other, grinning in mutual congratulation, having just wrapped up the Delaney interrogation. Even with a lawyer present, Delaney couldn't stop railing against Jim and Blair for their interference, since he had long believed that he'd not only gotten away with Abigail's murder, but he'd gained full ownership of her company and a young, if somewhat air-headed, wife and children to boot.

Boastfully crowing about how easy it had been to run the Castle's car off the road on a winter's night, he almost preened with his success at taking over the company.

Not heeding his lawyer's attempts to silence him, he ranted about the fertility sacrificial rite, and how it was his right as a married man to ensure his progeny survived to carry on his name and business. He continued by describing how easy it was to hoodwink his PA (later his new wife) into thinking he'd been in the office all the time, whilst actually slipping unnoticed out of the fire exit, having disabled the alarm. He performed the deed while Abigail slept, heavily sedated, having drunk the sleeping tablet-laced fresh lemonade he'd prepared especially for her that lunchtime. And of course he had been careful to use only the medication she had been prescribed by her own doctor, so there would be no trace of any unexpected chemicals in her blood; just slightly elevated amounts.

Being well aware of the chance of leaving other trace evidence behind, he'd taken the precaution of wearing a full protective suit, which he disposed of in the warehouse boiler room the following day, and even took the opportunity of a having quick shower in the company's changing room while his pretty but not too bright PA played with her files and typing.

Throwing up his hands in despair, the lawyer gave up on trying to shut his client up, and simply shook his head ruefully at the two detectives, before closing up his briefcase and heading out.

The confession was being typed up as they made their way up to report in to Captain Banks, and, once signed, Delaney was on his way to lock up, this time for good. He might not be recharged with his wife's murder, but he had killed her parents, and attempted to kill a police officer to boot.

Cascade General, Sentinel / Guide Ward:

Simon Banks strode down the corridor towards the nurses' station, on his way to visiting his best Sentinel Detective and said detective's unconventional partner.

Having been brought fully up to speed with Jim and Blair's investigation and its outcome by H and Rafe, he knew he was going to have to suck it up and force himself to accept the new partnership, which had proved to be so effective in such a short time. Galling though it might be, he now accepted that the young Guide's intuition had played a major part in closing the case, and, as a fundamentally decent man, he knew he had to make the effort to contain his revulsion for the boy's recent past. After all, it wasn't the kid's fault that he'd been coveted by a sadistic criminal, and Simon was just going to have to learn to reconcile his precious sensibilities with common sense if he was to truly understand the part that Blair's kidnapping had played in traumatising the boy.

He wasn't stupid enough to believe it would be all sweetness and light from now on, but he was prepared to give it his best shot. It was either that, or lose what promised to be the best Sentinel / Guide pairing Cascade had known in recent years.

Reaching the door to Jim's room, he straightened his coat, and, taking a deep breath, gently pushed the door open. Firmly squashing down the jealous reaction that threatened to choke him, he took in the scene before him.

Blair, dressed in scrubs *again* (and didn't he seem to have worn them almost every other day since his rescue?) was snuggled up to Jim's side, apparently asleep. Someone had thoughtfully put the rail up so he wouldn't roll off the bed, and his curly head was tucked firmly into Jim's neck.

Jim, on the other hand was awake, although obviously drowsy, and his arm was draped comfortingly around the boy's slender form.

"Captain –; come in," he whispered quietly. "Don't wake him," he continued, his expression fond as he stroked the young man's back with his free hand.

Simon harrumphed quietly, and slid into the room where he sat on the single visitor's chair next to the bed.

"Rafe and H have finished interrogating Delaney," he began, "and the man has confessed to everything. Seems he was skirting the edge of madness after all –; really thought the Anthro class was providing him with the method –; and permission – to rid himself of a barren wife and gain a new one who could give him the heirs he wanted. The kid was right all along," he added grudgingly.

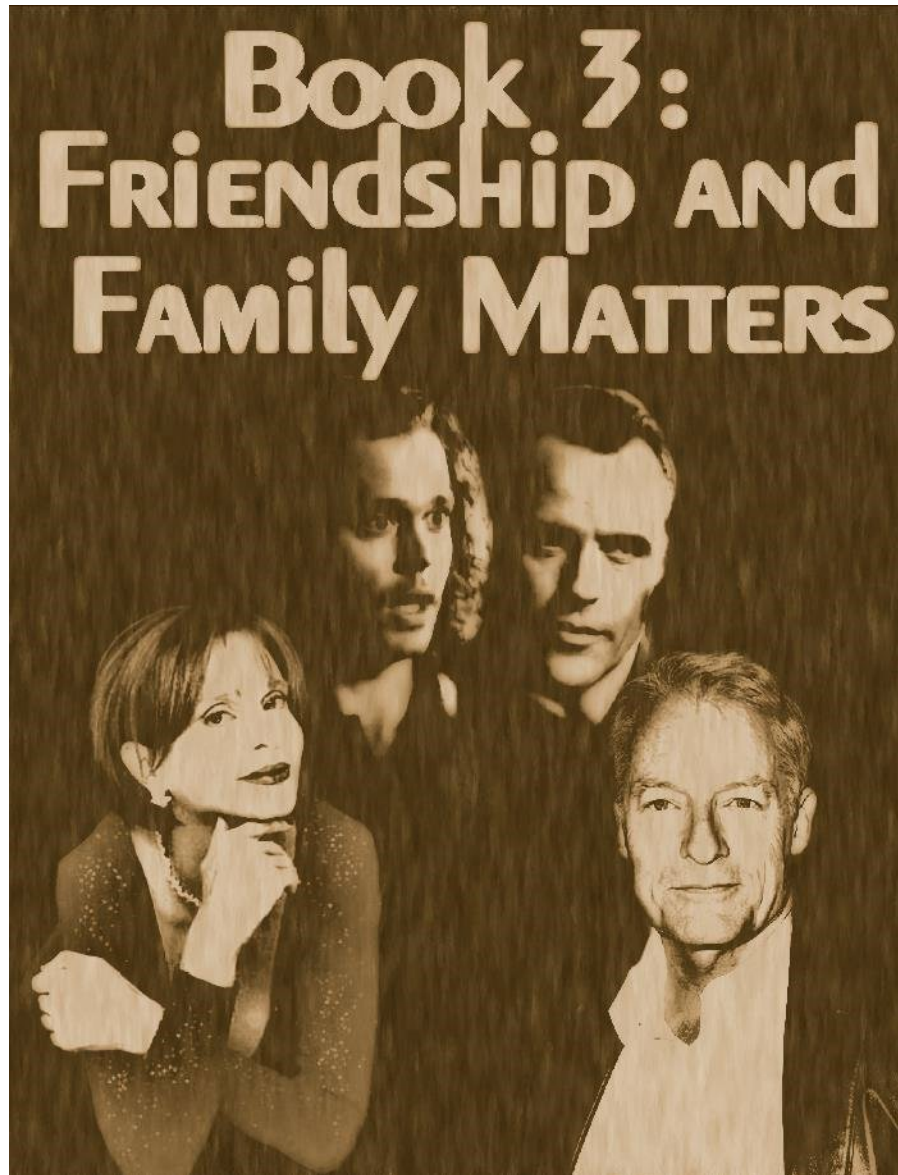
"Of course, Delaney'll have to undergo a full psych evaluation, but I believe he'll be deemed unfit to stand trial. I have the feeling he'll possibly end his days in Conover's ward for the criminally insane."

Jim nodded in agreement, unsurprised by Banks' assessment of the case's outcome. Then he turned his attention back to more important matters as far as he was concerned.

"I know you don't want to hear it, Simon," he said, "But Blair truly is the best thing that has happened to me, and, if you'll give him a chance, I know you'll eventually see that too. He's going to be wary and skittish for a long time to come, and may never get back to what he once was, but we're going to give it our best shot, and we're in it for life, Captain. I don't want to lose your friendship, Simon, and I don't really want to transfer to another department. Can we try to make this work? Because if not, we'll go to somewhere we're accepted for what we are."

"You always did tell it like it is, Ellison," and Simon sighed in weary resignation. "I don't want to agree, but you're right. I've been digging my heels in because I believe you could have done better, but," he continued, holding up his hand to stave off Jim's rejoinder, "That's not the point now, is it? You're fully bonded, and I have to accept that. All I can say is that I'm going to do my best to take the kid for what he is now, and not look for problems before they happen. I'll be off now, and I'll see you both tomorrow, once the Doc's given you clearance. Take care, Jim. And of him also," he finished, with a wry smile and nod at the sleeping Guide.

"Will do, Captain, and thanks." And with that, Jim closed his eyes and drifted off again into a deep and healing sleep, holding close the young man who was to him the most important person in the world.



Friendship and Family Matters

Blair was introspective on the drive back to the loft from Cascade General following Jim's release after being held overnight for observation; Jim having been knocked unconscious by the suspect they had been trying to question.

Although still a little groggy and suffering from the type of headache he needed to control by dialling down his senses and holding them there firmly, Jim had declared himself good to drive, and had helped his Guide into the cab of the truck which Simon had arranged to be delivered to the hospital. It had had to be picked up from where it had been left outside the Castle Lumber Company buildings; that being the location of the suspect, Albert Delaney's, business.

Knowing through their shared link that Blair wasn't inclined to open up with his thoughts just yet, Jim simply concentrated on keeping his emotions in check and sending calming 'vibes' to his young companion.

As they drew up outside 852 Prospect, he finally broke into Blair's musings, saying, "Those have to be worth a buck or more each, baby. Care to share your thoughts with your Sentinel, huh?"

Obtaining the desired response - a tiny smile from his anxious-looking Guide - he continued.

"Well, anything I should be concerned about, babe? Or are we good?"

"I'm sorry, Jim," came the quiet reply. "I don't mean to upset you. I'm just having a bit of a hard time processing everything that's happened over the last 24 hours. I'd like to talk over things with you -; you need to know after all -; but I don't know where to begin. It's so muddled right now, I can't even begin to explain how I feel...."

"That's what the bond's for, baby," replied Jim softly. "How's about we get ourselves cleaned up and do a bit of comfort snuggling in bed, hey? I know I wouldn't mind lying down again, in spite of being confined to a hospital bed for the night. Being woken every two hours to check on possible concussion isn't my idea of a restful night."

"OK, Jim. I could do that," responded Blair, looking pretty ruffled and tired himself having been woken just as often, which was hardly surprising since he'd shared his Sentinel's bed.

Locking up the truck they made their way into the building, with Blair tucked against his Sentinel's side as normal. As soon as they climbed into the ancient elevator, Jim leaned down and kissed his Guide gently.

"You did real good there, kiddo," he murmured. "I owe you, and so does the new Mrs Delaney, even if she doesn't realise it yet!"

Blair blushed a little at the praise and ducked his head before looking up into his Sentinel's eyes, his expression one of gratitude tinged with pure adoration. For his part, Jim couldn't fail to be amazed at the healing effect a simple compliment could have on his Guide's damaged ego, and promised himself he would offer them as often as possible.

"Thanks Jim. You don't how much that means to me, even though I have such a hard time believing in myself. I never want to let you down."

"You couldn't do that even if you tried," came the sincere response, murmured while Jim stroked the soft skin of Blair's cheek just below the beautiful and earnest blue eyes. Feeling the sap rising to an alarming degree, but not giving a damn, Jim pulled him in for a hug, which they held until the elevator finally arrived at the third floor.

Moving as one to #307, Jim let them into the loft and made for the kitchen after hanging his and Blair's coats up.

"Tea, Chief?" he enquired, filling the kettle. "I'm going to need something soothing to take with these meds, although I don't really need them with you to help me with controlling the pain dial."

"Yes, please, Jim. And you should still take the meds to give your pain control a break..."

"You got it, Mom," Jim replied with a smile, and collected the necessary tea and mugs.

"How's about you freshen up and go on up to bed, and I'll bring the tea up when I'm ready?"

Blair tensed minutely then got his reactions under control. He hoped Jim hadn't noticed his automatic response to the mention of 'bed', but of course the Sentinel would hardly have missed it. He felt bad that Jim might take it as a slight –; it really wasn't –; it was just the conditioning kicking in from his stint as Galbini's sex object. He threw a pained glance at his lover, and opened his mouth to apologise, but Jim beat him to it.

"It's fine, Chief. I'm not mad at you. It's just that old PTSD response catching you unawares again, isn't it? Lighten up, kiddo, and I'll join you in a sec."

Smiling in relief, Blair nodded and made his way to the bathroom to change out of the crumpled scrubs and wash up, making his way up to the large bedroom where he settled down on the side of the bed furthest away from the door as was their habit.

A few minutes later, after a quick pit-stop of his own at the bathroom, Jim mounted the stairs carrying the hot tea and smiled at the picture in front of him.

As usual, Blair had snuggled down under the sheet, as he still didn't feel comfortable exposed, and was deeply ashamed of the scars on his body despite his lover's protestations that they didn't affect his beauty. Although saddened by the reason behind his Guide's shyness, the view of his face peeking out from under the bedclothes was adorable, and Jim smiled warmly whilst putting the mugs of tea on the nightstand.

"Move over, gorgeous," he said with a suggestive leer. "I need my snuggle now –; injured party here!" but said in such a way that he hoped Blair wouldn't immediately be stricken by guilt, as he had been ever since the incident at the lumber yard. He was relieved when Blair only smiled a little at him this time, but knew that before the day was through they were going to have to talk.

Lying face to face, Jim reached out to touch his Guide, but as always kept his movements gentle and unthreatening until Blair relaxed. He always made a point of not covering the smaller man, which they had found out through past experience had tended to lead to panicked flashbacks of being pinned down by Blair's many abusers, so either faced him or lifted the smaller body to lie on top of him.

"I think we both need that bond now," he said quietly. He could feel through their link that Blair needed his Sentinel's strength and protection right now, as much as he needed to reaffirm his

total commitment to Jim. Likewise the Sentinel needed the thorough grounding that full imprinting with his Guide would provide.

"I want to try the full bond again, please, Jim. I think I'm ready and it's been long enough for me to have healed up properly."

"Are you sure, love? I don't want to pressure you at all, although there's nothing I'd like more," Jim replied feelingly, trying very hard not to overwhelm the young man with his surging excitement. After all, they had only bonded fully once, when he had penetrated his Guide under trying circumstances for them both. He was well aware that, even though Blair's hurts had healed, there was residual scar tissue which could lead to discomfort, especially when added to the nerves that the kid was sure to have. Apart from that occasion, which had actually turned out to be mind-blowing for them both, they had made do with hand jobs, cuddles and the occasion blow job when both were fully relaxed and in tune with each other.

"If you're sure, baby, then how about you ride me again? That way you are in control, and you can watch me all the time." He had given this a lot of thought, and really believed that this should be their position of choice, as it avoided the trapped feelings Blair suffered from when on his back, and the degrading submissiveness of being taken on his hands and knees.

Knowing what Jim had in mind, and loving him for it, Blair smiled, and reached up to kiss his lover gently. "Thanks, Jim. I really appreciate the thought, and I want to make this good for you."

"Always do, sweetheart, whatever we do," came the reply, and Jim rolled them so that Blair lay full length on top of him.

With mouths locked in a passionate kiss, he stroked and touched his Guide gently but firmly, and Blair reciprocated until the pair of them were well into the throes of heated love and lust.

"Get me ready, please?" gasped Blair, turning so that Jim could have easy access to him. By this time he was well beyond nerves, and moaned in pleasure as Jim stretched him, even though he could feel some discomfort from the scar tissue. This was Jim, his Sentinel, and Jim would never force him.

As soon as he felt ready, he turned back to his lover, who had propped himself up on a mound of pillows, and was waiting, cock hard and begging for attention. Blair reached for the lube, and gently slicked up the engorged member, knowing just how to touch to stimulate without pain or teasing.

"Ah, Chief, so good!" groaned Jim. "Need you now, baby!"

And Blair moved up the bed and positioned himself above the large cock, which he gradually sat down on, taking it in in small increments until they were fully joined.

"You OK, Babe, because I need to move!"

And Blair really was OK, and they soared into the heat and healing of the bond together.

In the drowsy aftermath of love-making, the pair cuddled together, sharing a combination of word and thought to mull over the issues raised during their first case together.

As an experienced police officer and former Ranger, Jim had long been used to controlling his emotions as regards crime scenes and criminals, even if it was much harder to do the same when it came to their victims. Also, as he had told Blair at the hospital, danger was sometimes unavoidable, and 'came with the turf' for an on-duty cop. However, he was well aware that Blair, however well-travelled and culturally adept, was still very young and strangely innocent of violence, despite his traumatic few months with the crime boss, Galbini. His Guide was a gentle soul; deeply hurt by past misuse for sure; but he was also a strong empath, and was naturally disposed to try to see the best in everyone. It followed therefore that the use of his newly discovered 'kinetic' powers caused immense disquiet to Blair himself, even if forced into it for self-defence, as with Davidson and Mancuso - the two crooked cops who had attacked him - and Delaney, who had (more importantly as far as Blair was concerned) attacked and injured his beloved Sentinel.

It fell to Jim therefore to try and offer comfort and support at a time when Blair's guilt was threatening to overwhelm him, and he did so firstly by sending all the calming thoughts he could manage through their link. He was finding this more and more natural, and discovered that the benefits were mutual, with them both relaxing into the cushion of each other's shared confidences.

Turning the sleepy face up towards him, he said, "I know you're still hurting right now Chief, and I can feel your uncertainty, but I promise you, baby, you made all the right moves. First you made the connection between Delaney and the U, and recognised the method of killing for what it really was, then you used your power to protect both of us, for which I'm extremely grateful. And think on this, kiddo. Delaney was only knocked out briefly, enough to temporarily disable him, so you must subconsciously be employing the control techniques they showed you at the Sentinel / Guide Department. There really is no need for all this doom and gloom!" And he finished his little speech with a kiss on the end of Blair's nose, which made his Guide go cross-eyed for a moment; making him look so cute Jim couldn't help but hug him even closer.

Swallowing hard and blinking back the tears threatening to spill down his cheeks at Jim's words, Blair hugged him back with all his might. "Thanks Jim. You make me feel so much better. I can't promise I'm ever going to be really cool about police work, but I'm going to keep doing my best, always."

"I know that, love. With you, it's a done deal, and I'll keep doing my best also to remember just how difficult this job is for you, and support you when things are getting too much.

"Now", he continued, wanting to change the subject to something much more cheerful for both of them. "I've been thinking about what Eli said when he came over. I know you haven't had much chance to talk to him lately, apart from thanking him for sending your stuff over, that is, so I was wondering if maybe you should call him up and ask if he's had any more thoughts about how you could go back to Rainier, at least for a few hours a week."

He was rewarded by Blair's now fully alert and dumbfounded expression gazing back at him.

"Oh, Jim, do you mean it? Can I? Oh man, that'd be so cool! I mean, it's not that I don't want to be with you, man, and I want to work with you..." and, aware that he was babbling, he hid his face against the muscular chest beneath him.

Jim, fully aware of the heat from the blushing skin pressed to him, let the kid down lightly. "Hey, baby, I know you won't abandon me -; I get that -; I just think you should get a little something out of our deal. I want you to keep in with academia, Chief. It'll be good for you -; Hell, it could be good for both of us in the long term - so stop with the angst and enjoy, OK?"

Nodding wordlessly against his Sentinel's chest, Blair tightened his arms as much as he could, and let himself believe that his life could really get back on track now he was under the protection of this wonderful man.

As it turned out, they were both so exhausted following the incident and its aftermath that they ended up sleeping peacefully for the rest of the day, not rousing until early evening. Jim decided that there was simply no point in going in to the PD at that time, so he rang Simon's office and left a message with Rhonda that they would be in first thing in the morning.

Eventually dragging themselves out of bed, mainly because of the siren call of the bathroom, they showered companionably and went in search of edible, as opposed to hospital, food, which was sadly lacking in quality even in the Sentinel / Guide ward.

The rest of the evening was spent cuddling up on the sofa in front of mindless TV until they both decided that perhaps returning to bed was a pretty good idea.

The next morning both woke early due to the prolonged 'bed' time they had enjoyed the previous day. After their customary shared shower, Blair helped Jim in the kitchen to prepare a simple but satisfying breakfast of eggs and toast.

After the clean-up, there was still a while to go before they had to leave for the PD, as Jim had no intention of going in too early. His head still ached uncomfortably despite the pain control, and the bruising on his forehead where the paperweight had struck him was now looking spectacular. He noticed how Blair's eyes kept straying to the small 'office' they had created under the stairs, but which Blair had seemed disinclined to use up until now.

"What's up Chief, you need something?" he queried.

"Uh, do you think I could...um...spend a little while sorting through my papers, Jim? I won't be long, I promise. I'll be ready to go when you are..." came the uncertain response.

Jim suddenly realised why the young man wasn't using the office –; he hadn't felt that he was entitled to take time for himself away from his Sentinel and protector –; so Jim knew he would have to straighten him out on that one.

"Sure, babe," he said with an encouraging smile. "That's what it's there for, after all. You'll need some quiet time and a bit of privacy when you start getting to grips with all that academic stuff at Rainier. Speaking of which, why don't you give Eli a call now before we leave so we can get things in motion?"

His answer was written all over his Guide's expressive face –; joy, amazement and gratitude –; so much so that Jim had to swallow round the lump that seemed to lodge suddenly in his throat. He simply hadn't realised just how much the young man had curtailed his lifestyle and normal wishes and actions in order to fit in with what he assumed the Sentinel needed in a companion. Add to that the horrors he had endured in Galbini's household, and it was a wonder Blair was even functioning.

"Hey," he said gently, "no need for you to be upset, baby. Just give Dr Stoddard a call, and then we'll make tracks for the PD after you've sorted out the office." And with that he gathered the small body in for a hug which was returned ten-fold.

Sniffing slightly, Blair eventually pulled away, and offering his Sentinel a somewhat watery smile, he walked over to the cordless phone mounted on the wall.

Grinning in response, Jim moved away to give his Guide some privacy, and began sorting through the kitchen cupboards to make a list for some grocery shopping that they would need to do after work.

Although he knew it wasn't really proper for him to listen in to Blair's private call, he salved his conscience by thinking that, if there was any disappointment brewing because the professor had re-considered his offer to Blair, Jim would rather know it immediately so he could begin to pick up the pieces. Therefore, he opened his hearing enough to hear both sides of the conversation, and was moved to smile gently to himself at the genuine affection that came over the line from Eli in response to Blair's shy introduction.

"My dear boy! How good it is to talk to you at last! I was beginning to think that your work with the esteemed Sentinel Detective Ellison was going to take up all your time after all. I was talking with Lottie Bristow" (the Professor they had consulted in the Delaney case) "and she told me how you two were tracking down potential suspects! I just know it was your insight that led to the Mayan connection, dear boy...you have always been so intuitive..."

Finally pausing for breath long enough for a blushing Blair to make his tentative enquiry into returning to Rainier, there was barely a pause before the enthusiastic response was forthcoming.

"But of course we must arrange something, dear boy! I know it's too late to enter the doctoral programme this year, and I recall that your partner advised me as to how much of your time would be spent at the Police Department, but perhaps you would consider taking on a part-time position as my researcher and assistant? I'm putting together the basis for an expedition to Borneo, and desperately need someone reliable to help out. I don't suppose you'd be able to accompany me on the expedition itself, more's the pity, but then it'll probably be for at least a year, and I'm sure your Detective Ellison won't want to part with you for that long! But anyway, there's a good deal of preparation to be done before then, and you could maybe even get a paper or two out of some aspects of it. What do you say, son? Are you interested?"

Almost overcome with gratitude and happiness at the professor's enthusiastic offer, Blair could barely stammer out his thanks. Looking over at Jim for his agreement, he accepted, but explained that Jim would have to be consulted regarding dates and hours.

"But of course, dear boy! Wouldn't have expected anything else. So how about the pair of you come to my office tomorrow evening and we'll thrash out the details?"

Glancing again at Jim, and receiving another nod of assent, he thanked Eli effusively again, and ended the call.

When he turned to Jim, he glowed with a depth of emotion Jim had never seen as yet on the beautiful face, and Jim automatically opened his arms to receive the bundle of happy Blair that hurtled in his direction.

"Oh thank you, thank you!" Blair choked out, almost crying with pleasure. "It's so great –; I can work with you and go to the U as well. I never thought I'd ever get any life back, but then you claimed me. What did I do to deserve you? I love you so much..." and then he did begin to cry in earnest, but for the best of reasons.

Jim simply smiled indulgently and held him while he rode out the storm of emotion, and once the young man had regained his equilibrium, he gently steered him towards the bathroom so he could splash some water on his face, and suggested he spend a few minutes in the office, sorting out a few papers before they had to leave for the PD. Smiling, Blair did as he said, and spent a happy half hour setting up his ancient laptop, and putting his Sentinel notes in some sort of order.

Jim was enchanted to hear Blair humming to himself –; a sure sign of true contentment, and was moved to congratulate himself just a little on the success of his plan.

Blair was fairly vibrating with barely-controlled excitement during the drive to the PD, and Jim was smugly high-fiving himself on providing the stimulus to open up his Guide's expectations and hopes for a future he thought he'd never have. He was honest enough to recognise that it wasn't completely selfless –; after all, a happy and contented Guide made for a satisfied (or in his case, self-satisfied) Sentinel –; but in view of what the poor kid's future would likely have been in Galbini's clutches, the only way was up, as the saying went.

Mind working overtime with ideas and prospects, Blair didn't even tense up with nerves as he had done on all previous trips to the PD, and was oblivious of the reception the pair were getting from passing cops, particularly uniforms.

Jim, on the other hand, had no intention of letting down his guard, and listened in shamelessly to each and every comment.

Sorting through the various whispered communications and the accompanying emotions behind them, he was surprised but pleased to pick up plenty of approving and even admiring references to his Guide's ability. Sure, there were a few snide comments about 'freaky shit', and 'weird little faggot', but these were few and far between and obviously stifled swiftly once the accusers were aware of the Sentinel's presence.

Smiling slightly and with a thoughtful expression on his face, Jim held his Guide close, and entered the bullpen to a loud and enthusiastic greeting. Caught unawares, Blair startled and huddled close to Jim, gripping his jacket with both hands, until he realised that the sentiment behind the uproar was genuine and good natured. Relaxing by degrees, he glanced up at Jim to register Jim's approval, then moved away slightly to be pulled into several hugs and back-slapping embraces as the other Major Crimes detectives congratulated him on both helping to solve a difficult cold case, and for his extraordinary contribution in the arrest of the suspect, protecting his downed partner at the same time.

After a few minutes of genial conversation, and enquiries into Jim's health, the group broke up when Simon called out from his office for Jim and Blair to enter, "My office, now!"

As per usual, Blair once again retreated into himself, and slid behind Jim's broad back, but Jim noted that the sour stench of outright fear was absent, replaced by the lighter scent of tension and some small anxiety. Maybe his Guide was getting a handle on his perception of Simon's intimidating behaviours, and also realised that his Sentinel would never allow the big captain to hurt him either emotionally or physically with impunity.

Hoping this was indeed the case; he pushed Blair ahead of him into Captain Banks's office, and smiled at the man in cheerful enquiry.

"Sit down, both of you," growled Simon. Rolling one of his precious cigars in his fingers, he seemed to take a moment to compose himself, then said, "Good to see you back in one piece, Ellison, even if your face is in glorious Technicolor. You too, Sandburg. I'm pleased to say that

the Delaney case will be open and shut, thanks to his full confession, but it's likely that a psych evaluation will prove that he's too mentally compromised to go to trial, so he'll cop an insanity plea. Still, he won't be seeing the outside of Conover for many years, if ever, so you can say the outcome is a success. Just wanted to let you know that I appreciate your input, Sandburg, and to invite you two to the poker night at my place this Friday."

Blair's mouth had dropped open in shock, but Jim grinned at his Captain. "Why, thanks, Simon, yeah, poker night'll be good. Won't it, Chief," he added, nudging Blair in the ribs with his elbow.

"Uh...uh...yes sir, thank you sir," came the bewildered reply. "Um...do you need us to bring anything?"

"Just yourselves this time, kid," replied Simon, suddenly realising he was smiling at the young man, and that the reaction was perfectly genuine and spontaneous. Pulling himself up short before he could get sappy –; (Heaven forbid!) – he added, "OK, what are you still doing here? Back to work, both of you!"

"Yes Sir!" they responded simultaneously, and headed for the door, Jim grinning widely in satisfaction, and Blair still reeling in shock. He'd been invited to poker night! One of the most sacred rituals of the cop closed society! Wow! Perhaps he did stand a chance of being accepted after all.

The rest of the morning was taken up by finishing up the Delaney report, and catching up on the paperwork which had accumulated on Jim's desk over the last few days.

"I think the damned stuff breeds spontaneously when I'm not here to see it," he grumbled, tossing various memos to Blair to deal with, along with anything else he could get away with.

Blair typed assiduously and searched as necessary without complaint, since he was well used to such computer grunt work associated with studying at Rainier, and the fairly mindless tasks gave him ample opportunity to sort through the myriad thoughts racing around his brain.

He was thrilled with the idea of working with Eli again, and, knowing that of necessity it would only be a few hours a week, he was fairly certain he could manage to be away from Jim's side without too much strain on their bond. Having said that, he was even more certain that neither of them would ever be able to be separated for very long periods without some sort of detrimental effects. Such effects would undoubtedly be particularly marked in his case, as the empath in him relied heavily on Jim's physical and mental protection. He pondered as to whether he should suggest that they test the theory to see how long they could comfortably manage? It could well be that practice, coupled with the strengthening of the bond over time, could eventually mean they could comfortably be apart for reasonable periods. On the other hand, short of being medicated to suppress his empathy, or, in Jim's case, to dampen the hyper senses, long-term or permanent separation was unthinkable. Since the thought of such

separation terrified him, he ruthlessly quashed the unhappy thoughts before too much distress could leak out and alert Jim through their link.

Even so, he looked up guiltily when Jim nudged him with an eyebrow raised in tacit question.

"Sorry, Jim. I'm OK, just got a bit caught up in my thoughts for a moment," he murmured, mostly truthfully. "Nothing to worry about," and he treated his Sentinel to a completely unconscious dose of appealing, puppy dog eyes.

"*Sure* it isn't," Jim replied knowingly. "I think we may have to work on some of your anxieties, Chief, so you can actually enjoy your hours with Eli!"

Blair sent him a small relieved smile. He should have known that Jim would realise what was worrying him, as his Sentinel knew him intimately down to the deepest level. He supposed that he should be aggrieved or concerned that the other man understood him so well, but instead he simply felt loved and cherished in a way that he had never experienced before in his young life, not even from his mother.

Smiling with genuine happiness, he turned back to the computer and carried on with wading through the stack of forms.

After a lunch of subs from the deli just a block down from the PD, Jim got a call from Captain Sullivan from Vice. It was the first time he had spoken to the man since the Galbini bust, and he was somewhat wary, since he and his guide had been instrumental in exposing no less than four of the Vice cops as crooked. Two of them, Davidson and Mancuso, had been so deeply in that crime lord's pocket that they had abused Blair when he was Galbini's sex slave, and when they attacked him again at the PD in an attempt to frighten him into retracting his statement, he had unintentionally killed Davidson in self-defence in the first manifestation of the kinetic energy at his command as a projecting empath.

In view of their recent history, Jim was surprised when the man, politely enough, if not exactly affably, asked if Jim and Blair could assist in going over a crime scene.

According to Sullivan, there appeared to have been a random drive-by shooting at a strip club in the seediest part of Cascade's red light district. Several of the clients and a couple of the dancers had been hit, plus the club's manager; a known minor criminal who was mostly into pimping and prostitution. At least three were pronounced dead at the scene, and the others, including the manager, were in critical condition in Cascade General.

Basically, Sullivan needed sentinel expertise to back up that of the forensics department to try and find some evidence of who perpetrated the massacre, and why, since the manager seemed to be too small a player to attract a turf war type of shooting. He assured Jim that there would be full cooperation from the Detective on scene, and added that he had already spoken to

Simon to get the go-ahead to approach Jim and Blair. Under the circumstances, Jim could hardly refuse, so he agreed to Sullivan's request that they go straight to the scene. Replacing the handset, he stared at it distractedly for a few moments before turning to an anxious Blair, who was hovering at his elbow; having picked up on Jim's mixed emotional response.

"Well, Chief, looks like we're seconded to Vice for the afternoon," he said with a wry half-smile, and looped his arm comfortingly around the young man's shoulders when the predictable nervous reaction kicked in.

"Hey, babe, don't get so worried. Sullivan sounded OK, just relieved when I agreed to help, so I don't think we'll have any trouble. Besides," he continued with a frown, "Anyone says or tries anything around us, and I'm out of there, and he knows it!"

"OK, Jim," replied Blair, gazing earnestly up into his eyes. "I know you'll look out for me." Then, after a deep, steadying breath, he added, "What is it they want you to look at, Jim?"

"It's not going to be a barrel of laughs, I'm afraid," was the grim reply. "There's been a drive-by shooting at a strip club, and Sullivan wants me to take a look to see if there's anything forensics have missed. I'm sorry, kiddo, but I'm going to need you with me on this one."

"I'll do my best, Jim, really. I know that I've got to get used to all kinds of scenes, so I'm good. I may not be quite so good after we get there, though," he added in a brave attempt to lighten the situation.

Squeezing Blair's shoulders amicably, Jim once again thanked the gods for his Guide's resilience, and grabbing their coats, they made their way to the red light district and the torn up and blood spattered bar.

Having reached the general vicinity of the bar, they were forced to park up about a block away, and approached the cordoned off area. Showing their IDs to the cops at the barrier, they made their way forward and got their first real look at the crime scene.

The Blue Lagoon had been a sleazy strip joint-cum-bar-cum-brothel, catering for the lower class of john, but it was now a shattered wreck, with broken glass and splintered woodwork, liberally coated with blood splatter and other more grisly remains. Jim glanced down quickly at his Guide, who was growing paler by the second, and was only somewhat relieved to see that the bodies of both surviving and deceased victims had already been removed. Curling a protective and comforting arm round Blair's shoulders, he whispered, "You really OK with this Chief? You can wait in the truck if you want...."

He was more than grateful when his spunky little Guide gulped and then replied firmly, "No way, Jim. You'll need me when you get to work, so don't worry -; I'll deal...I hope!" this last muttered almost *sotto voce*.

Giving him a reassuring smile, Jim led him forward towards the shattered front door. There they were met by one of the largest men Blair had ever seen, including Simon Banks, and he shied away automatically, totally intimidated. Growling, Jim stepped in front of him, only to be totally disarmed when the giant figure smiled and introduced himself as Detective Daniel Brown, newly transferred to the depleted Vice unit.

Surreptitiously reading the newcomer's aura, Blair realised that, not only did the man appear to be genuinely friendly, but he also had low-level empathic capability, suggesting that there were Guide genes somewhere in his ancestry. Reassured, he crept out from behind his Sentinel's broad back and smiled a little nervously up at the man. Daniel held out a huge paw and grinned in welcome. "Hi there, Guide Sandburg," he rumbled. "Real glad to meet you, son. Your rep –; well, both of your reps –; precede you. I'm honoured to work with you." So saying, he gently took Blair's small hand in his own to shake.

Bristling with indignation, and shocked at his instinctive reaction, Jim couldn't fail to suffer a fierce pang of jealous possessiveness, which was only disarmed by his Guide's gentle touch on his arm and within his mind, reaffirming their mutual devotion.

Getting himself back under control with a minute full-body shake, he dredged up an almost genuine smile, and studied the man before him.

In his early thirties, Daniel was indeed huge, at least six five in stocking feet, and built like a line-backer. However, the intimidating stature was offset by a strong-jawed, open face, with twinkling green eyes and a ready smile, topped with light brown hair worn in a buzz cut. The fact that he obviously approved of Blair was the deciding factor as far as Jim was concerned, so he took the guy at face value, and asked how he wanted them to proceed, seeing that it was officially a Vice case.

"Well, forensics has been all over the scene for a while now, since the shooting took place in the early hours of the morning, just as things were winding down inside. There's one eye witness, a street kid, who couldn't give us much except that the assassin was covered in tattoos, was wearing a black do rag and denim vest, and riding a 'really cool bike, dude'. Could fit any or all local bike gang members I guess. Plenty of spent shell cases and tyre marks from the bike out front."

Jim looked thoughtful. Moving towards the tyre tracks with Blair clutching his arm to ground him, he peered at the distinctive tread, a frown of concentration wrinkling his brow.

"These look like they were laid down by a Harley Electra Glide. That's a 'really cool bike' all right, but not one I'd have picked for a drive by," he murmured. "I don't know for sure, but I've got a hunch who may be involved, but no reason as to why yet. Let's have a look around and see if we can come up with something concrete."

Nodding in response, Dan turned towards the busted up door, while Blair glued himself to Jim's side. Gazing in horrified awe at the extent of the damage he whispered, "Jim, man, what sort of weapon could do all that?"

"The ballistics guys and forensic firearms specialists would have to confirm it, Chief, but I'd say it was a 'spray and pray' job".

He grinned at Blair's bemused expression, and continued. "There's an automatic machine pistol that gangers love to use for drive-bys. It's called a MAC 10 45 ACP. Fires a shit load of shots in a wide arc, but isn't exactly accurate, hence the term 'spray and pray'. You just point and shoot and hope you hit something, or several somethings. Ideal for causing mayhem."

"Oh, man," whispered Blair, gulping down his automatic queasiness. "I guess it was just bad luck for the folks that got in the line of fire, then. Do you think it was meant as a warning to the club owner, Jim?"

"Yes, Chief, but pinning down the likely suspects and the reason behind it may be difficult to prove."

Dan, who had been listening in to the conversation, said, "I think you're on the nail about the warning part, son, but the manager, Carl Schiffer, wasn't known for anything much more than running a stable of cheap girls and this dump. Pretty much a low-key sleaze-bag. Doesn't look too hopeful that he'll pull through to give us any relevant information either."

Nodding in glum assent, Jim and Blair entered the building with Blair concentrating everything he had on his Sentinel, so he wouldn't have to look too hard at the gore. After they had both donned latex gloves, Jim did a slow sweep of the bar area, with Blair murmuring non-stop irrelevancies, as it was the soothing sound of his voice rather than the content of his speech that grounded the Sentinel. Added to his gentle grip of Jim's arm, and Jim found his senses clearer than he'd ever known, seeing with pin point clarity, and touching and feeling more than he ever had before.

Thus it was that he could make out the finest of lines in an apparently solid panel behind the bar itself, probably done with a laser. He could clearly make out several sets of fingerprints around the area, and called the nearest Crime Scene tech over to dust, record and photograph them. Then, with Blair's help, he gingerly felt for a pressure point or mechanism which would open the section of panelling.

Mere seconds later, he pushed gently and the panel section swung open to reveal several plastic wrapped bundles of powder and a stash of greenbacks.

"Well, lookee here," he crowed. "Guess we just found out the reason for the warning, Dan. If Schiffer was trying to expand the business into the drugs trade, he was asking for retaliation from the locals. I don't think this is the work of a major player; more likely to be the guys who hang out on Grant and Jefferson."

Grinning in conspiratorial glee, Dan slapped his shoulder. "Great job, Jim! This is just what we needed! This is also why we desperately need a Sentinel / Guide pair of our own in Vice -; we can't keep calling you away from your own case load. Maybe we'll get lucky with the new 'recruits'!"

"You're welcome, Dan, but I couldn't do this without Junior here," Jim replied, hugging Blair to his side. "I don't mind helping out when I can, though, but the better option would be to recruit some more established pairs as you say."

"Anyway, do you need us any longer, or are we good to go now?" This because he could tell Blair was wilting rapidly, not only from the reaction to being exposed to the gory scene, but also physically. The young man's health and stamina was improving in leaps and bounds under Jim's constant care and attention, but it was still only a matter of weeks since he was a half-starved sex slave, beaten and abused at will by a sadistic crime lord.

"Sure, Jim, Blair. Thanks again, and I'll keep you in the loop as things progress, if you want?" said Dan, with a quirk of an eyebrow.

"Yeah, definitely!" came the enthusiastic reply, and the partners shook the large detective's hand in farewell, and returned to the truck.

Once seated, Jim pulled out his cell and reported in to Simon, quickly and succinctly filling him in on the findings at the scene. He also asked if they could call it a day, as Blair was drooping against the passenger window, fighting to keep his eyes open. Simon agreed in an apparently grudging tone, but Jim was sure he could detect a hint of genuine concern in the man's gruff voice. Smiling, he ended the call, musing on how the big captain seemed to be coming round regarding his Guide. Perhaps he would eventually accept them after all, given time.

"Hey Chief, you OK to do a bit of grocery shopping on the way home? Shouldn't take too long, then you can get an early night."

Rousing himself with a shake, Blair smiled over at him. "Sure, Jim, I'll be OK, honest, and we do need some more veggies and stuff if I'm going to do the stir fry I had in mind."

"Fine, kid, and stir fry's good with me, if you can stay awake long enough to do it!" Jim teased, and, starting up the truck they headed for the store and loft in that order.

The following morning it was a bright eyed and bushy tailed Blair who climbed into the truck with Jim to head out to the PD. Jim had ensured that there would be no nightmares for the young man following his exposure to the grisly crime scene by making gentle love to his Guide until Blair fell into a deep and restful sleep.

"You know, Chief," said Jim with a laugh, "You make a pretty good stir fry even when you're asleep on your feet. I was really impressed."

"Really?" replied Blair happily. "Thanks man. I love to cook, and I make good pastry too. One day I'll treat you to my special quiche."

"Quiche, Sandburg?" responded Jim with a mock scowl. "Do I LOOK like a Quiche man to you?"

Blair giggled endearingly. "But it *is* real special, Jim. Naomi taught me to make it..." He tailed off abruptly, and just like that, the enjoyment died out of his eyes and his expression became sad.

"Hey, kid," murmured Jim worriedly, reaching over to lay a comforting hand on Blair's knee. "What's with the long face?"

"I'm sorry, Jim. It's just that I suddenly realised that I haven't seen or heard from Mom for over a year. The last time I spoke to her was before Thanksgiving last year, when she called to say she wouldn't be coming to visit as she'd found another retreat in New Mexico. I don't think she even knows about my being kidnapped. I mean, if she had, she'd have come, wouldn't she?" he finished uncertainly

Squeezing the knee under his hand in compassion, Jim was at a loss for words. Sure, his own mother had walked out on him and his father and little brother, but he couldn't understand how a woman who supposedly adored her brilliant son could stay out of touch for so long. It was almost as if the kid was some sort of temporary possession that she only thought of occasionally in passing, and picked up to play with when the mood struck.

He could feel the anger and resentment on behalf of his young Guide rising up like a black wave, and, knowing that Blair would pick up on it easily and become even more distressed, he fought to control both it and the growing urge to seek out the woman and give her a piece of his mind.

Sighing deeply, he sought to lighten the dismal mood by introducing a change of topic.

"You know, Chief, I'd almost forgotten that Thanksgiving is only a few days away. What do you want to do? Have a meal out somewhere to celebrate, or shall we have the real deal at home? I'll bet we could do a mean turkey between us. What do you say?"

Knowing that Jim was trying to make him feel better, and loving him for the effort, Blair shook off his gloomy thoughts and replied with rising enthusiasm.

"Oh yeah, a turkey dinner at home!" he said. "That would be awesome! I've got this great idea for chestnut stuffing..." and he was off and running.

Jim smiled contentedly, glad that he'd staved off the kid's unhappy mood, and let the soothing voice wash over him for the rest of the trip.

When they arrived at the bullpen, there was barely time to acknowledge their friends' words of welcome before Simon's normal bellowed demand rang out. "Ellison, Sandburg, my office!"

This time, Blair barely flinched, and a pleased Jim placed a hand on the small of his back and guided him towards the door.

When they stepped inside, they found Detective Brown already seated there. Standing, he held out his hand to each of them in welcome. "Hi guys, hope you don't mind, but I'm looking to borrow you again if it's OK with Captain Banks."

"Hey, Daniel, how's the case shaping then?" said Jim, shaking the proffered hand.

Shaking Blair's hand next, Daniel replied, "It's coming together well, thanks to the evidence you found for us. Although it's not cut and dried by any means, what we have so far should be enough to justify at least questioning the 'Sons of Satan' bikers at their HQ at Grant and Jefferson like you suggested. The street kid came up with a few more 'facts' once we'd offered him enough monetary incentive, such as the tattoo on the perp's upper arm, which matched the 'devil' one the gang members like to wear. Why the guy should have been so blatant about his visibility beats me, but then again, it wouldn't be much of a warning if the target didn't know who was doing the hit, I guess.

"Anyway, he also remembered a few more details about the 'cool bike', which is a Harley, like you said, Jim. The paint job is one of those customised ones which we think belongs to Rich Pearson, the 'Son's' second-in-command. Added to that, the spent cases from the MAC 10 could be useful if we're right, because I'll bet that Pearson's too arrogant to dispose of the weapon.

"What it boils down to is that Captain Sullivan wants to confront the gang at their place, but keeping the backup out of sight until they're needed. He wants to keep it as low-key and unthreatening as possible in the first instance so's not to stir up unnecessary trouble. I'm going to go in, and I'd be glad of your company if you're OK with it, so you can tell me what's going on inside the building. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me, Dan, but Blair stays in the truck. I don't want him in the line of fire if we're made, and everything goes pear-shaped." Holding up a hand to forestall his Guide's instant denial, he continued, "No, Chief. I won't have you in danger. I'll be OK, and won't overstretch the senses without your backup. Also, I don't want to be distracted by worrying if you're safe, so no arguments, period!"

Subsiding unhappily into his seat, Blair knew better than to argue with his Sentinel, and could understand Jim's reasoning even if he didn't like it.

Simon spoke up then. "When is this going down, Detective Brown?"

"About mid-morning, sir," Daniel replied. "We're hoping that they'll still be coming round from their normal late-night partying, so won't be too alert. And Captain Sullivan has insisted on Kevlar," he added quickly, forestalling Banks's next demand.

"Well, if you're OK with this, Jim, you and Sandburg can go along, but take care, the pair of you. I've got plenty of work in this department to keep you occupied without lending you out to all and sundry!"

So saying, he shoed them out of the office to get ready for the briefing, telling them to get it over with a.s.a.p. so they could get on with some 'real work'.

The pair accompanied Daniel down to the briefing room in the Vice unit, where they were met with a welcome that was cool, but not as disapproving as Jim might have expected considering his and Blair's recent history with the department.

Although Blair was noticeably nervous, and kept his gaze down at the floor, he was comforted not only by his Sentinel's warm hand on his shoulder, but also by Daniel's obvious acceptance and approval which seemed to have a positive effect on the other cops present.

Sullivan outlined the plan, which was a straight forward one consisting of an initial non-confrontational approach of the gang's HQ by Daniel and Jim. However, at the least sign of hostility, the backup would move in from their hiding places in the vicinity, to surround the building and block the escape routes for any gang members who tried to run for it.

As the backup officers had already been advised of their positions, they left to get in place while Jim and Daniel went over a last few details with the captain, after which they made their way down to the parking garage.

Jim had insisted that he use his own truck, which had enough room for the three of them if Blair sat in the back, and Daniel was happy to oblige.

Turning round to address Blair, Daniel said, "You all right, son? Just to put your mind at ease, although I don't claim to be a Guide, and wouldn't dream of trying to interfere with a bonded pair, I do have low-level empathic ability, so I can help out in a crisis, if you get my meaning. If Jim here just wants a bit of grounding I can do that, but I don't have the capability to get a sentinel out of a zone. Do I have permission from both of you to act if needed? I don't want to cause any offence here," he added quickly, as he could easily read the emotions flitting over Blair's face and flowing through him.

Blair's initial reaction had taken him completely by surprise, so quickly had he wanted to deny the request, and order the man to keep away from HIS Sentinel. He had never before had any person or object he had been allowed to consider as his personal property, so the instant possessiveness towards Jim startled him. However, almost immediately he could feel Jim's touch in his mind, calming him and reaffirming his love, so he took a deep breath and willed himself to relax.

"I'm sorry, Detective Brown. I shouldn't have doubted that you only want to help. It's just that I'm so new to this, and I guess I haven't gotten used to having a real partner," he finished, shyly glancing at Jim.

"Hey, no problem, son," replied Daniel soothingly. "Frankly I'd have been surprised if you hadn't reacted, as I can see how strong your bond is. Just as long as you know I'm not here to muscle in on you. And you can call me Dan, you know. I'm not used to that formal 'Detective' shit."

"OK, Dan," Blair replied, relieved that he hadn't caused offence to either Jim or the other man.

"But I still don't see why I should wait in the truck. Can't I--"

And that's as far as he got before Jim nearly jumped down his throat.

"Not on your life, Chief! There is no way any civilian partner of mine is walking into potential danger unarmed and untrained. You're not a cop, kid, and you could be a liability, so don't even *think* about it!"

Jim knew he'd come over really strongly, and was sorry to feel his Guide's immediate withdrawal as well as his hurt and embarrassment, but he'd deal with it later after the operation. What mattered now was that Blair should obey him and stay safe.

The rest of the trip was completed in silence as all three men were left to their own thoughts.

When Jim pulled up at the appointed spot, Sullivan was already there with two uniforms. Handing out three Kevlar vests, he asked if they were good to go. Receiving an affirmative, he looked at his watch and confirmed their time of arrival at the grungy ex warehouse that the Sons of Satan called their headquarters.

The building at the corner of Grant and Jefferson was in one of the most run-down areas of the city, bordering the red light district, so not far from the Blue Lagoon strip joint. It would be in easy reach of a bike-riding assassin, who, with a little creative back-tracking and zigzagging, could make his escape and be back in the warehouse with the other gang members and their hangers-on almost before the emergency teams had pulled up.

Less than ten minutes after leaving Sullivan, Jim stopped the truck just around the corner from the scruffy warehouse, and climbed out with Daniel. Both had their vests beneath their outer clothing, along with the usual wires for the benefit of their watching backup, and the damp Fall weather gave them a good excuse to be huddled in winter-weight jackets. Blair, on the other hand, wore his Kevlar vest on the outside because he wasn't intended to be part of the operation, so it was for protection only in case of things going belly-up. He sat sulking in the cab, with a frown and pout that made him look like a little kid. Jim, who knew that he would be highly amused by the young man's expression at any other time, couldn't afford to be

distracted now, so simply closed the door saying curtly, "Just make sure you keep your head down, Chief," and then turned with Daniel to walk casually towards the front of the building.

Like Daniel, Jim had automatically taken note of available cover should their bluff be called, and saw that the most promising protection was that offered by the dumpsters lining the wall of the neighbouring building; the burnt-out shell of an old office block. They nodded to each other, wordlessly acknowledging their shared recognition of the fact, and continued on their way.

In the truck, Blair watched anxiously as his partner and Dan disappeared around the corner. Torn between obeying Jim's orders and his instinctive need to be with his Sentinel, he worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he debated with himself. True, he'd had total and instant obedience beaten into him by Galbini, but the Guide in him needed to act. Making up his mind, he slipped out of the cab and quietly made his way to the corner of the street and peeked round so he could keep the other men in sight.

Meanwhile, Jim was keeping up a quiet running commentary as he and Dan neared the building, trying to appear non-threatening whilst keeping within range of the dumpsters should they need to dive for cover.

"I can hear eleven heartbeats inside, but at least three of them seem to be asleep. There's an armed lookout in the top right-hand window. Now they're arguing as to who's going out to see what we're up to. All awake now. Doesn't sound very promising--"

Suddenly everything seemed to happen at once. As the armed lookout opened fire on the two cops, there was the deep-throated roar of a bike engine, as at least one of the gang members made his escape out of the back exit. At the same time, there was a piercing screech from some kind of alarm. As Jim had his hearing wide open, the noise ripped through him, and he fell to the ground clutching at his head in agony.

Dan, who had started running for shelter, turned back to help Jim, only to run into the hail of bullets coming from the building. He went down as one hit him in the chest, wounding him despite the Kevlar, and another grazed his upper arm where there was no protection.

With a scream of horror, Blair sprinted towards his downed Sentinel, completely ignoring the gunfire, and threw himself across the prone body, urging Jim to listen to only his voice and dial down everything else. Dan, who had gotten his breath back, helped Blair drag Jim to his feet, and they staggered towards the dumpsters while the other backup units screamed to a halt surrounding the building and laid down covering fire.

In a matter of minutes, it was all over as the gang surrendered to the overwhelming odds, except for the one who had made good his escape on the bike, avoiding the hidden police cruisers by cutting through a series of narrow alleys. He wasn't expected to get far, however, as his description was circulated rapidly to the rest of the force to arrest him on sight.

Behind the dumpster, Dan, clutching the graze on his arm, watched Blair talk his Sentinel down from the pain spike and back to normal. He smiled at the relief on the young man's face as Jim shook his head to clear it then looked up at his Guide. However, instead of thanking him, he laid into Blair in fury, shocking both of them. Completely stricken, Blair listened in horror as Jim yelled at him for disobeying orders, and, grabbing his upper arms, shook him like a rag doll.

"That's enough, Jim! Leave him be!" yelled Dan, springing to the Guide's defence. Grasping Jim by the shoulder, he pulled the other man round to face him.

"Butt out, Brown," snarled Jim threateningly. "This is between me and Sandburg!"

"No way, Ellison. Look at him! He just saved your life, goddam it!" Brown's voice was harsh as he drove his point home, needing to get through to the furious Sentinel.

Jim whirled back to face the kid, and stopped short when he saw the tears streaming down the devastated face. He was immediately filled with remorse, yet the fear that had struck him to the heart on seeing his beloved Guide running heedlessly into danger wouldn't allow him to forgive the kid yet, and his anger simmered barely contained just below the surface.

Turning his back on the other two, he stomped off towards the other units where Sullivan was waiting and watching the arrested gang members being cuffed and read their rights before being taken downtown for questioning.

Blair trailed dispiritedly behind him, only slightly comforted by Dan's warm hand on his shoulder. He was convinced that it was all over, and that Jim would break up their partnership. He was filled with an unbearable sadness at the thought of being cast aside by the person he loved most in the world, coupled with terror at what sort of future a discarded Guide could look forward to, continuously medicated to control the emotional input with which a bonded empath without a Sentinel's protection was constantly barraged. The distressing notion was strengthened all the more by the fact that Jim had cut off their mental link, and Blair was unable to feel anything from his Sentinel but the anger which seemed to roll off him in waves.

Unconcerned with disagreements between Sentinel and Guide, Captain Sullivan simply told Jim to return to the PD to help with the questioning, and ordered Dan to get his arm checked out at the ER.

Nodding in reluctant acquiescence, Dan gave Blair's shoulder a final squeeze, and hitched a lift with one of the cruisers to Cascade General.

Still not looking at Blair, Jim stalked back to the truck and climbed in. When the passenger door remained closed, he finally looked up, and saw the young Guide gazing in at him, but making no move to enter. He was mortified to see the total devastation on the beloved face. Blair's eyes streamed with silent tears, and were filled with a depth of despair Jim had never seen before, even when Blair was still at Galbini's place.

Jumping back out of the truck he moved swiftly round to the other side, to see his Guide flinch and tense up, clearly expecting a blow.

"Oh, Chief, I'm not going to hit you, baby. I'll never hit you, however mad you make me. Come here," he murmured and held out his arms, reopening their mental link.

Blair didn't hesitate, but threw himself into the hug, crying harder and sobbing, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," over and over again into Jim's chest. "Please don't leave me. I'll do better, I promise. I just wanted to help. Please don't break us up. I'm so sorry."

"Hush now, Chief, it's OK, I'm not kicking you out. Come on now, let's take this inside, huh?" and Jim gently pushed Blair away so he could open the passenger door and lift the still trembling figure into the truck.

As soon as he had climbed in himself, he tugged the young man over to him, and held him close while he attempted to explain his reactions.

"Look, baby, I'm sorry to have upset you so much, but you scared the life out of me when I realised you hadn't stayed in the truck. You took absolutely no notice of the fire fight. You could have been killed! I *do* appreciate that you did it for me, and yes, you did help me, but if it had been at the expense of your life, I'd never forgive myself. Hell, I wouldn't live without you, kiddo. You're everything to me!"

Blair could tell through their link that his Sentinel was completely sincere, and he was filled with remorse that he had caused Jim so much pain. However, he still couldn't believe that he'd been wrong to come to his Sentinel's aid. It was part of what made a Guide a Guide.

Haltingly, he tried to explain how he felt, trying to convince Jim of his deep-rooted need to protect as he was protected. He was truly sorry for disobeying Jim's orders, but he admitted that he couldn't in all honesty do anything else when he saw Jim go down.

Jim could feel Blair's inner turmoil, and found he couldn't maintain his irritation with the other's obstinacy. It was, after all, why he was such a strong Guide. It was no comfort however, in the face of the possibility of losing said Guide in the dangerous situations that Jim was always likely to find himself in while working in the field.

"OK, Chief, we'll leave it for now, but we have to discuss this more fully later. I do understand, but I can't lose you, baby, so we're going to have to come up with some sort of compromise, except for the life of me I can't see how yet!"

And with that, he gently pushed Blair away so he could buckle up and set off back to the PD.

They completed the trip back to the PD in silence, both wrapped in deep thought, but with the mutual comfort offered by their link re-established.

They went to Major Crimes first, as Jim wanted to get Blair settled at his desk in the bullpen rather than drag him unnecessarily down to Vice for the debriefing and follow-up questioning. Although somewhat calmer now, Blair was still visibly upset and teary-eyed, and there was more than one speculative glance cast in their direction when they entered, despite the fact that Jim still held the smaller figure close to his side as usual. Joel and Megan, who were looking over a file together at Megan's desk, had no qualms about coming over immediately to find out what the trouble was.

"Bloody hell, Sandy, what's he been doing to you?" asked Megan worriedly, completely disregarding Jim's frown of annoyance at her approach.

"Are you OK, kid?" this from Joel, who was close behind.

Blair smiled a little tremulously at them, grateful for their concern, but rather embarrassed by the attention. "I'm fine, really," he whispered, aware of Jim's rising irritation.

"Look, just leave it, OK? He's just had a bit of a scare, but he'll be all right in a bit, won't you Chief?" Jim added pointedly, steering his Guide around the other two to seat him at his desk.

Crouching down to look into the worried blue eyes, he continued more quietly for Blair's ears only. "I'll be as quick as I can, baby, then we'll go and get a bite to eat. I expect I'll have to go back down to Vice again this afternoon to continue with the wrap-up, but there's a fair bit of paperwork here to keep you busy if you feel up to it."

Patting Blair's cheek gently, he stood up and made for the door, stopping briefly on the way to reassure Joel and Megan that things really were OK between them, but that a little TLC for his Guide wouldn't go amiss. The Aussie Inspector was quick to put his mind at ease.

"No worries, Jimbo, I'm on it!" she said briskly, giving him a quick grin. Joel simply smiled gently at him and nodded, squeezing Jim's shoulder in passing as he turned to follow Megan.

Blair, meanwhile, quickly swiped at his face with his sleeve, surreptitiously trying to wipe away the tear tracks he was sure were still visible to all and sundry. Fervently wishing the ground could open up and swallow him, he was convinced that everyone present must consider him a real wimp, and ducked his head in shame when he saw Megan and Joel approaching. He was somewhat surprised when she simply ruffled his hair affectionately in passing, and returned to her desk, only to open the top drawer and pull out a magazine.

"There you go, Sandy," she said brightly, plopping the latest National Geographic down in front of him. "I hope you haven't read that one yet!" she added.

Stammering his thanks, Blair blushed and smiled up at her, to receive a pat on the cheek this time.

"I don't think Jimbo will mind if you have a read of that before tackling his paperwork, love," she said with a wink, and returned to her desk where she and Joel calmly carried on where they'd left off with studying the file.

Bemused but very touched by the kind gesture, Blair settled down to read, smiling happily to himself and not noticing the conspiratorial grin exchanged between Joel and Megan.

As Simon was out of the office attending a funding meeting with the Commissioner, the Mayor, and the Chief of Police, Rhonda popped her head out of her office, and seeing Blair, put on her personal kettle to make him a drink of hot chocolate.

When it was done, she walked over to the young man, who was engrossed in his magazine, and put it down in front of him, along with two chocolate chip cookies.

"There you go, Blair," she said with a kind smile. "You look like you're ready for a hot drink."

Quickly closing his mouth, which had fallen open in surprise, Blair beamed at her.

"Thanks so much!" he said, quietly but sincerely. "That's so kind of you..."

"No trouble, dear. Enjoy," she responded with another smile, and returned to her office, quietly pleased that she'd brought a little happiness to the boy's face.

'I wonder if he has any idea how beautiful he is, especially when his face lights up like that?' she mused, before turning her attention back to the pile of forms and memos in her in tray.

Several hours later, Blair had finished the magazine and was making serious inroads into Jim's paperwork when the man in question returned to the bullpen. Although he looked a bit tired, and had been away far longer than he had intended, he was cheerful enough, and he gathered his Guide up into a quick hug.

"Come on, kid, it's time you had something to eat –; besides cookies, that is!" he added, having scented them on the young man's breath, and noticing the few crumbs dotting the front of his shirt.

Blair blushed and ducked his head, but smiled happily when he realised that Jim wasn't cross with him, just joking.

"Rhonda was so kind," he said shyly. "She made me some hot chocolate too. And Megan gave me a magazine...that's OK isn't it?" he finished, suddenly unsure if he should have accepted it.

"Of course it is, Chief. I'm glad you had something nicer to occupy yourself with other than my paperwork –; as long as it gets done later!" he added with a mock growl. "Let's go to the break

room and see what we can get from the vending machines. I know it's not very appetising –; not even sure if some of it qualifies as food –; but it'll save time, and the quicker I can finish with the case, the quicker we can get home. Don't forget we're supposed to be seeing Eli this evening."

"OK Jim. That'd be good," replied Blair, lighting up with enthusiasm at the thought of going to Rainier. He had thought for a while that perhaps, even if he wasn't going to be dumped as a Guide, Jim might be too angry with his disobedience to let him go back to the U.

Pulling him close, Jim ushered him out of the bullpen to the break room. Seeing that the room was empty, he took the opportunity to give Blair a reassuring hug and kiss before eyeing up the contents of the vending machines. "What do you fancy, Chief?" he asked, looking askance at what was on offer.

"I can get them, Jim," replied Blair, happy that he now had a small allowance from the Sentinel / Guide Dept as an official bonded Guide, and he'd already received his first weeks' pay. Jim was hopeful that eventually he'd get a bit more from the PD as Jim's partner, but that hadn't happened yet.

Knowing how much it meant to Blair to be able to contribute a little to their partnership, Jim smiled at him and picked a half-decent looking beef sandwich. Choosing a tuna one for himself, Blair fed the machine with coins while Jim poured them both a cup of coffee, after first checking that the pot hadn't been stewing away for hours.

Settling down with the snacks, Jim explained what had happened so far with the case between mouthfuls of slightly rubbery beef.

Firstly he assured Blair that Dan Brown was fine and already back at the PD. The bullet that clipped his upper arm had only left a deep gouge that needed a couple of stitches. Blair was relieved, because he really liked the genial giant, and was glad that the wound wasn't bad enough to keep him off work.

Next he went on to explain that, although the rest of the gang hadn't admitted to anything other than opening fire at what they believed to be an attack by a rival gang, Rich Pearson, the biker who had made his escape, had been stopped by traffic cops just a couple of hours later trying to get out of Cascade. Not only that, but he was found to still be carrying the MAC 10 machine pistol he'd used for the drive-by. "No accounting for arrogance and stupidity, thank the gods," was Jim's sardonic comment, which conjured an answering grin from Blair.

Charged with the shooting, and knowing he was going down for four counts of murder since Carl Schiffer had since died in hospital without regaining consciousness, Pearson knew he was facing the death penalty. Not willing to take the rap alone, and hoping to make a deal, Pearson rolled over on the rest of the 'Sons'.

He asserted that he had been ordered to do the drive-by to warn off Schiffer from muscling in on their turf by getting involved in drug dealing. The leader of the 'Sons' hadn't cared if there were any casualties as long as their potential rival got the message, and stuck to pimping and running the strip joint. With the confession typed up and signed, there was nothing left for Jim to do but to write up his own report and head on out

A couple of hours later, having finished typing up his report and updating Simon, recently returned from his successful, if protracted, meeting, the pair left for home with the captain's blessing.

Back at the loft, Jim and Blair grabbed a quick shared shower, although Blair made time to give his Sentinel a much appreciated blow job. He was so grateful that the man he adored wasn't mad with him anymore, and he desperately needed to show Jim how much he was loved.

In return, Jim had gently washed the smaller man, touching and caressing the slender body until Blair had come with a deep sigh of pleasure.

Drying off and changing into fresh clothes, Jim ordered a pizza as they were both too tired to bother with cooking, and they needed to hurry anyway if they were to make their evening appointment with Eli Stoddard.

Pizza finished up and clean up done, they headed out to Rainier and, entering Hargrove Hall, made their way to Dr Stoddard's office. Answering Jim's knock with a jovial "Come in!" Eli stood up from his desk, and came round to give Blair a friendly hug and to shake Jim's hand vigorously.

"So glad you could make it Detective Ellison, Blair, my boy. I hope you haven't reconsidered your decision to return, because I've rather taken it upon myself to arrange for your appointment as my part-time Research Assistant. I was thinking maybe two mornings a week as a start, with a few more hours when things are really busy?" Pausing for breath, he beamed at them, then continued hopefully, "Well, what do you say, dear boy? Is that what you had in mind? Of course I expect you'll need to be flexible because of your work with Detective Ellison, but perhaps you could come in tomorrow morning to see how things go?"

Cocking his head to one side, Eli gazed expectantly at the pair, and was somewhat amused to see the effect of his words on them.

Jim was staring at him blankly, looking as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him, and Blair simply stood opening and closing his mouth in wordless astonishment, before managing to gasp out, "Oh Eli, that's so great! I can't believe you could do that for me. I'm so grateful, I can't begin to thank you..."and he tailed off, looking hopefully at Jim for his approval.

Shaking himself, Jim patted Blair's shoulder comfortingly and spoke up. "That's really good of you, Professor. I can't see any problem with a couple of mornings, especially as you're allowing Blair flexibility in his hours. Only one thing," he added with a smile. "I thought we'd agreed that you call me Jim? Detective is too formal, and Mr Ellison is my father!"

"Of course, Jim, and you'll call me Eli, won't you?" came the cheerful rejoinder. Smiling beneficently he continued, "I've no doubt you'll have plenty to discuss between yourselves, so I won't keep you any longer, but I'll look forward to you coming in tomorrow morning, all right, dear boy?" And without further ado, he ushered them out of the office again.

When the door closed behind the still stunned pair, Eli chuckled to himself, rubbing his hands together in glee since not only had he managed to entice his favourite student back to Rainier, but he'd managed to render him speechless while doing it. Yes, it was going to be so good to have Blair back working and studying with him again.

As they left the building, Blair still wore a flabbergasted expression, and kept glancing at Jim to make sure he really was OK with Eli's somewhat overwhelming approach to recruiting. He was vastly relieved when Jim smiled down at the young man tucked under his arm, chuckling wryly as he commented, "Do you know, Chief, I don't think I've ever experienced such a quick job interview. I feel like I've been run over by a truck!"

"I'm really pleased for you, though, baby," he continued sincerely. "It's no more than you deserve, and perhaps one day you'll even be able to get back into the doctoral programme. After all, you're still only twenty one, and you've got that Master's under your belt already."

Giving Blair's shoulder another squeeze, he steered them back to the truck and they drove home in companionable silence, both contemplating the new element in their lives together.

The following morning, Blair was nearly vibrating with a combination of nerves and happy anticipation. The thought of a few hours at the U poring contentedly through the contents of the library stacks was taking on the role of a dream come true in his imagination, whilst he had remembered, with some trepidation, that it was Friday, and that tonight he and Jim were expected at Simon's house for the regular poker night.

Jim smiled at him with gentle amusement as he sought to get as much breakfast into his excited Guide as possible, knowing that Blair wouldn't think to feed himself with so much racing around in his hyper-active brain.

Finally they were ready to head for Rainier so that Jim could drop Blair off before going on to the PD, but only after reassuring Blair yet again that he would be on desk duty during his Guide's absence. Holding his battered backpack to him like a security blanket, Blair nearly bounced in his seat, only quieting when they were approaching Hargrove Hall.

"Are you really sure I can do this, Jim? I mean, I so want to do some work with Eli, but you're more important to me. Are you really OK with working at the PD without me?"

"Sheesh, kid," an exasperated Jim replied. "For the last time, yes, I DO want you to have some time here, and yes, I'll be quite all right on my own in the office. I'm not going anywhere unguided without you, baby, so just jump on out and go, enjoy!" He finished his speech by leaning over to give his Guide a deep kiss, and smiled fondly as the excited young man bounced out of the truck, and, with a cheery wave, ran up the steps of the hall just like a happy school kid.

It wasn't until he was half way to the PD that Jim really realised that this was the first time he and Blair had been apart since their bonding less than a month ago, and the reality hit him hard. As he drove, he pondered on how his life had changed so dramatically, but in the best possible way.

Sure, he'd landed himself with a damaged and somewhat fragile Guide, but in other respects the young man was everything he could have dreamed of; beautiful, smart and totally devoted to him. No longer alone either at home or at work, he knew that he was one lucky Sentinel.

On the other hand, he was under no illusions about his own effect on Blair. Without the bonding, the young man would have likely faded slowly, even away from Galbini's clutches, as his latent talent was probably too strong for anyone but an alpha sentinel to cope with and he knew for a fact that alphas were pretty thin on the ground. Not only that, as they tended to come online at an early age, they were usually paired to strong guides very quickly through the Sentinel / Guide Department. It was either through pure luck or perhaps karma that Jim had managed to repress his senses as a child, and only came back online in time to meet up with his true Guide.

Arriving at the PD, he made his way up to the MCU, fielding cheerful greetings and more than one query as to the whereabouts of his shadow. Gratiified to find that Blair already seemed to have been accepted as a proper partner for him in his work at the PD, he was smiling by the time he reached the bullpen. After letting Simon know of his arrival, he passed a few minutes exchanging pleasantries and few ribald jokes with the other detectives present, then settled down to an unexciting morning of paperwork.

Meanwhile, over at Rainier, Blair was happily filling Eli in with some of the nicer changes in his life, and, receiving a list of references and papers that needed looking up and noting, he bounced his way over to the library to lose himself in the book stacks as if he had never been away.

It wasn't until several hours had passed and lunchtime was nearing that he began to feel a little strange. Unable to pin it down at first, the feeling grew until it culminated in a profound sense

of loneliness, as if he was totally cut off from the rest of the world. Worried and upset, he started to gather up his books to return them to the library shelves, then, stacking up Eli's notes and papers, he almost ran out of the building back to the professor's office.

He had almost reached the steps to Hargrove Hall, when a familiar truck pulled up alongside him, and Jim's beloved voice called out to him. Without pause, he ran back to the truck, and threw himself into Jim's waiting arms as soon as the Sentinel emerged from the cab. Within moments, the feeling of loneliness and terror had subsided as they comforted each other through their link, and Blair's trembling had virtually stopped.

Pulling back, he gazed hungrily at his Sentinel for a long moment, then said plaintively, "Gods, Jim, I don't know what happened. I'm sorry for jumping on you like that, but I felt so afraid, so alone. It started growing in me about an hour ago, and I just couldn't stand it anymore."

"Same here, Chief," replied Jim ruefully. "There I was slaving away at my pile of paperwork, when I realised I couldn't reach out to you anymore, and I just had to get here and make sure you were OK. I've got a feeling that it's some form of separation anxiety, and it may be that you'll have to have slightly shorter hours here until we get more used to being apart."

"I think you're right, Jim. I'd better tell Eli. I hope he won't be mad at me," Blair added, chewing his bottom lip in consternation.

"I'm sure he'll be just fine, baby," Jim reassured him. "If anyone knows about Sentinel / Guide dynamics, it's your professor." And with that, he tucked Blair under his arm and the pair of entered the hall, completely oblivious to the amused and questioning stares of the passing students.

Sure enough, Eli, far from being mad at Blair, apologised profusely at not considering the newness of the bond, and was perfectly amenable to shortening Blair's morning hours for the time being until both Jim and Blair grew more accustomed to being apart. He suggested that, in the meantime, perhaps Blair could do some of the work from home so that they didn't get too behind, and Jim was more than happy to give his approval.

Relieved and much more relaxed, they returned to the PD after Blair had stuffed his backpack full of papers for studying and note-taking at home, stopping briefly at a decent deli to pick up sandwiches and chips for a snack lunch.

The afternoon turned out to be quiet by Cascade standards, with no murder and mayhem landing in their laps, so the partners were able to leave the office at a reasonable hour, with Simon's reminder about the poker night ringing in their ears.

Later that evening, having showered and changed, Blair prepared a light meal of pasta before they left for the poker game, insisting that his Sentinel had to have something healthier than the beer, chips and dips that would be available at Simon's house.

Smiling contentedly as he watched Blair putter around in the kitchen, Jim realised with a pang that he'd never really known this sort of domestic comfort, even as a child. At least, not after his mother had walked out. Although Sally, his father's housekeeper, had done her best to love and care for two small boys, the strictness of his father had overshadowed her efforts. Even during his short marriage to Carolyn there was no sense of domestic harmony, since Caro hated cooking, and was more concerned with pursuing her career than playing house with Jim.

Watching his Guide putting the final touches to the pasta sauce, Jim speculated on what sort of early life Blair had really had. During bonding, he had explored many of the kid's early memories, and had probably looked deeper than perhaps he should have, particularly as he was aware that Blair was still too unsure of his situation even now to do more than take a superficial mental 'visit' to his Sentinel's mind.

The memories Jim had allowed himself to view seemed to consist of rapidly changing countries and stopping places, none of which appeared to qualify as 'home'. Brief flashes of an inquisitive child, trying to learn as much as possible, and gleefully absorbing different sights and sounds, were interspersed with less happy glimpses of the same child dragged unwillingly from newly-made friends as his mother took off for yet another fresh pasture. There were also a few darker images that Jim had tried to ignore as too intimate for his Guide to share willingly. Jim pondered for a moment, thinking that perhaps he should look deeper, even though it was something of an invasion of privacy, overriding the young man's diffidence in order to offer comfort and support.

Shaking his head, he terminated that line of thought for the time being, and moved to the table where Blair had placed two plates full of delicious-smelling pasta.

An hour or so later they were in the truck heading for Simon's place in a pleasant, tree-lined suburban street, with Blair clutching a six-pack on his knees. He had grown noticeably quieter as the journey progressed, and Jim was uncomfortably aware that he was picking up the scent of mounting anxiety from his Guide.

"Hey Chief, you OK there?" he asked. "Look, if you really don't want to go, we'll turn back and I'll make our excuses to Simon. I don't want you having a panic attack as soon as we get through the door," he continued, only half jokingly.

Blair seemed to jump, thoughts returning rapidly from wherever they had been taking him.

"No, no, I'm all right, man. Really. I'll be OK. I don't want to spoil your evening, Jim. I'll be fine, honest!" He knew he was babbling, but couldn't seem to stop himself. Yes, he was nervous, but the last thing he wanted to do was to get between his Sentinel and his friends.

"OK, if you're sure," replied Jim, relieved but not entirely convinced of the truth of his Guide's assertion.

A few minutes later they pulled up in the street outside Simon's house, and Jim noted from the other cars already parked up that they were probably the last to arrive. Climbing down from the truck, he walked round to the passenger side and relieved Blair of the six-pack so he could jump down to the sidewalk.

"You good to go, then?" he said handing back the beer as Blair seemed to want something to distract him a little.

"Yes, Jim, I'm good," came the not-quite-convincing reply, then Blair took a deep breath and set off up the path, Jim's arm around his shoulders.

When they reached the front door, it was answered almost immediately by Simon, who was headed to the kitchen for the chips and snacks.

"Aha! Donations always welcome, heh!" he rumbled, relieving Blair of the six-pack. "Come on in. The others are already in the den –; you know where that is, don't you, Jim?"

"Sure, Simon," he replied cheerfully, moving to steer Blair down the hall, only to pause when Blair spoke shyly to Simon, offering to help with getting drinks and snacks from the kitchen.

Raising an eyebrow, Simon clapped him on the shoulder. "Sure, kid! Make yourself useful. I sure don't get offers of help from this bunch, so I'll take any that's going." Casting a grin over the young man's head at Jim, he winked and led Blair into the kitchen, where he quickly loaded his willing volunteer's arms with a tray full of bowls of chips and a variety of dips and nuts.

"Well, far be it for me to avoid my share," laughed Jim, and took up his own armload of beer to accompany the food.

"I could get used to this," chuckled Simon, and, empty handed himself, led the way down the hall to a large but cosy den, where Joel, Megan, Rafe and H were engaged in light-hearted comparisons between the Jags and various opposing teams.

As soon as they spotted the newcomers, the others offered smiling greetings, and a few snarky comments about ass-kissing and 'slave labour', but no one except Jim noted Blair's slight flinch at the latter.

Deciding to let it go, rather than risk embarrassing his Guide by drawing attention to the innocently made comment, Jim put down his armful of drinks and started to pass them around.

"Just helping out the elderly..." he smirked, and had to duck to avoid a pillow thrown at his head by Simon.

With Jim successfully defusing the situation, and knowing that everyone present was genuinely pleased to see him (having quickly 'read' them for any potential antipathy towards him), Blair smiled with his customary shyness and quietly put the tray he was holding down on the side table indicated by Simon.

"OK then, gents –; and lady (heh, heh!) are you all ready to get your clocks cleaned? I'm feeling lucky tonight!" said Simon, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "You'll be playing too, won't you, kid? I mean, I assume you can play poker?" he added, directing his attention to Blair.

Blair was taken by surprise, as he had honestly not expected to be asked to join in. He was grateful enough to have been invited along for the evening.

"Um...yes sir. I've played before, if you're sure...?"

"Wouldn't have said so if I didn't mean it, kid," came the reply. "And less of the 'Sir' when we're off duty, all right? But call me anything but my given name, and I won't be a happy camper," he added with a mock scowl.

Blair smiled at him and said, "Yes, sir –; um, Simon," and ducked his head, blushing right up to his hairline.

With that, they settled down to play, breaking off occasionally for drinks and snacks while the banter continued unabated.

A couple of hours later though, Simon was already regretting the magnanimity of his offer to let his newest recruit join in, since the majority of the winnings were piled up in front Blair. Not only could Sandburg play, but he was damned good at it too, so Simon sat back and glared across the table.

"Well, that's me out. And there was me thinking you'd be easy pickings, kid!"

Horrified that he'd upset the Captain, and everyone else for that matter, Blair stammered an apology and tried to push the pile of cash away from him. He truly hadn't meant to offend anyone, but had merely lost himself for an hour or two in a friendly game.

"God, kid, it's OK!" said Simon before Jim could speak up in defence of his Guide. "That was a joke, Blair. Just don't make a habit of cleaning me out every time, huh? It makes me feel humble, and I don't do humble!" he added with a wolfish grin.

Relaxing when the other detectives added their own friendly agreement, Blair lit up with his first real megawatt smile of the evening, and the effect was stunning. Jim smirked smugly, H and Rafe couldn't help but smile indulgently in response and Megan and Joel's wide grins did their

best to compete with the happiness that almost oozed out of the young Guide's pores. Simon simply offered another knowing grin, and stood to usher his guests out.

"Enough already," he said with a chuckle. "I'm off to bed to lick my wounds, so get out you lot, and get to your own beds." And with that, he shoed them out of the front door, and waved them off with his smile still in place.

The group milled around for a few moments saying their goodbyes before dispersing to their cars. Rafe and H, who had driven over together, slapped Blair and Jim on the back with a friendly, "See you two Monday," from Rafe and a good-natured, "Great playing, Kid -; don't spend it all at once!" from H.

Megan gave Blair her customary enthusiastic hug. "Sleep well, Sandy! And you too, Jimbo! Have a good one!" and waving jauntily, she climbed into her car and drove away.

Last to go was Joel, who smiled at them and asked what they'd be doing at the weekend, seeing as they'd managed to get until Monday off, and Thursday was actual Thanksgiving. Jim smiled at the older man, and slinging an arm around Blair's shoulders, he hugged him as he replied, "We're spending some time chilling out at the loft, Joel. And come Thursday, Blair here's a great cook, so we're going to have the whole turkey deal, and kick back for a while, aren't we, baby?" Blair blushed at the compliment but nodded happily.

"That's good, Jim. I'm glad you'll be having the chance to celebrate at home. I was going to invite you round to our place, but it sounds like you two have got things sorted. If you change your minds, though, you're welcome anyway. You know how much Ellen likes to cook," he added, smiling fondly at the thought of his wife of nearly thirty years bustling round the Taggert's homely kitchen.

"That's very kind of you, Joel, and we really appreciate it, but I think we're good to go. I have to admit I'm looking forward to watching Blair here stuffing the turkey!" Jim joked, steering his Guide towards the truck.

"Night, Joel," said Blair with a small smile, and with a final wave they parted company.

On the way back to the loft, Jim squeezed Blair's knee, snickering, "Well, you sure took them by surprise, baby! I'd never have guessed you were such an ace card player. After all, you've probably got the most expressive face I've ever seen. Even without the benefit of a poker face I'm guessing you've probably doubled your earnings for this week, huh?" and he smiled affectionately at his Guide when Blair blushed with pleasure at Jim's words of approval and admiration.

"Thanks, Jim," Blair replied. "I was taught to play by one of Naomi's boyfriends one summer, when he couldn't think of what else to do with me. I think it was mainly intended to shut me up from continuously asking questions. I guess I wasn't the easiest kid to look after," he added, a little sadly.

"Now there you'd be wrong," said Jim with conviction. "I'm thinking that they should have been delighted to have such a smart and inquisitive kid around. I know I wouldn't have minded having a kid like that," he added honestly.

"That's good of you to say, Jim, but do you still want children?" asked Blair, somewhat afraid that the answer might be positive, which would leave him just where?

"No, Chief, not now," replied Jim, correctly interpreting the anxiety lurking behind the question. "Maybe once, when I was married, but it didn't last long enough, and Caro wasn't prepared to give up her career for motherhood, believe me! And before you ask, I've never considered it with any other woman I've been with since, and I certainly don't want to consider it now, babe, because there's no way I'd ever make you move over to make room for a new wife."

Easily discerning the truth behind Jim's fervent declaration, Blair relaxed and smiled happily at his sentinel lover. "Thank you for telling me, Jim. I truly wouldn't have wanted to stand in your way if you did ever want to marry again, but I'm so happy that you want me with you. I want to stay forever!" he added, somewhat daringly, and was hugely grateful when Jim simply responded with a satisfied smile, and another squeeze of his knee.

Saturday morning turned out to be a relaxing time for both men, as they took the opportunity of having a lie in for some gentle loving and serious cuddling, only getting up when the bathroom called too urgently. Even then, they lounged around in their robes over a leisurely breakfast while making plans for the rest of the day, which would include shopping for as many of the fixings for their planned Thanksgiving dinner as they could get in advance, and getting some more shelves for the office now Blair was going to be doing more of Eli's work at home.

Blair was just getting up to refill their coffee mugs when Jim looked up with his head slightly cocked, and Blair knew he was listening to something unexpected. When Jim also sniffed lightly, Blair rested his hand automatically on Jim's arm to ground him.

"There's someone entering the building, Chief," muttered Jim, a frown of concentration creasing his brow. "A woman, and she sounds as if she's in a hurry. She also smells a bit like you, kiddo...." and then he looked intently at his Guide's paling face.

"Do you think it could be Mom?" Blair whispered, almost afraid of the answer. "It's been so long -; how would she know where I am?" and he began to chew his bottom lip in worry, torn between a longing to see his long-absent parent, and wondering what her reaction was going to be to find him here.

He didn't have long to wait before there was an impatient knock on the door, which Jim opened a fraction later, not wanting to disconcert their visitor by opening the door in advance.

He stood back in amazement as a tall, slender, red-headed whirlwind flew past him into the loft to grasp Blair by the upper arms and peer into his face.

"Oh sweetie, there you are! I called your digs and they said you'd gone, and they couldn't tell me where. I had to go to the university and that old professor you used to like told me your new address. Why didn't you let me know? Where have you been? What are you doing with those horrid tattoos? And who is this person?" she waved backwards at Jim. "Tell me everything, sweetie, then you can get packed and come with me. We'll go back to Taos. You look like you need to process..."

Finally able to get a word in edgeways, Blair responded, "Please, Mom, if you'll just give me a chance I'll explain, but can we at least sit down first? I think there are some things that will be hard for you to hear," and he urged her over to the love seat and knelt opposite her, keeping hold of her hands.

"This is going to be hard for me to tell, and probably harder for you to hear," he reiterated, "but please at least give me a chance and don't get mad," he pleaded.

When Naomi nodded, a tiny frown appearing between her brows, Jim moved quietly over to the kitchen area where he could monitor the conversation without appearing to intrude.

Taking a steadying breath, Blair began. "First, Mom, you should know that I'm not really at the U anymore. You see, just after I submitted my Master's thesis, I was kidnapped off the campus." At Naomi's shocked gasp, he said, "I did try to contact you before it happened, Mom, because I wanted to tell you about finishing my paper, but you'd gone to Tibet and I couldn't find a contact number."

"Well, the retreat didn't allow for outside contact, sweetie, you should know that. After all, you've been to several similar ones with me..." Naomi replied distractedly. Suddenly she seemed to actually register what her son had said. "What do you mean, kidnapped? Was it him?" She glared in Jim's direction, ready to do battle.

"No, no Naomi, not Jim! Jim rescued me, took me in. But I was with a gangster named Galbini for nearly six months. He did some awful things to me, Mom. He...he...he r raped m m m me. Over and over...." He tailed off into humiliated silence, and hung his head, unable to meet his mother's shocked eyes.

"Oh goddess!" breathed Naomi, lifting a hand to her face in horror. "Is that where the tattoos come from, then?" she demanded, and received a nod of confirmation from her son's bowed head.

"Tell me you fought them hard, sweetie. That you defied them," she implored, slipping her fingers beneath Blair's chin to tilt his face up to meet her burning gaze.

"I tried, Naomi, truly I did," whispered Blair, voice filled with shame and self-loathing, "but they drugged me and beat me, and I couldn't fight them anymore and...please don't be mad at me, Mom."

When there was no immediate response, he struggled on, knowing that he must tell her everything at once, because he knew he'd never be able to go through this again.

Looking up to see Jim gazing at him, nothing but love and support filling his crystal blue eyes, Blair gathered his courage around him and said, "It was when Jim rescued me that I found I really was a Guide, Mom. Jim's a Sentinel Detective with Cascade Major Crimes Unit, and we bonded. I'm so grateful that he wanted me. He's given me a home, and even lets me do some work at the U--"

He got no further, as Naomi shrieked in horror, and leapt up from her seat.

"Blair, how could you? How *could* you tie yourself to a sentinel, and a jack-booted thug of a pig at that! Why didn't you fight it, run away? You still can! Yes, come with me now and we'll get you help to break this bond. I have to get you away from here! Go and pack right now!"

"That's enough!" roared Jim, quickly moving forward to take the trembling body of his distraught Guide into his arms. "Lady, I don't want to hurt you, because you are Blair's mother after all, but you don't get to blame him for things he had no control over, and you don't get to insult me in my own place. You don't get to muscle in here dictating to a son you haven't even tried to contact for over a year. I suggest you get out now, and if Blair wants to see you again, we'll be in touch." And he glared at her, while tucking Blair's face into his neck, and stroking his Guide's shaking back with a soothing hand.

Struck momentarily speechless, Naomi glared back at him for a long moment, then spun towards the door, saying over her shoulder, "You haven't heard the last of this, pig! I know what's best for my son, and it certainly isn't you!" And with that she slammed the door behind her, Jim following her retreating footsteps down the stairs and out of the building.

"Oh god, oh god, I'm so sorry, Jim. I'm so sorry she took it so badly. I hoped that at least she wouldn't have a go at you, man. I'm sorry". And the tears came then as he clung to his Sentinel with all his strength.

"Don't worry about me, babe," murmured Jim softly, rocking slightly as he cuddled the smaller figure close. "I'm just sorry that she upset you so much. I'd have expected more sympathy at least...."

"No, man, not really," came the snuffly reply. "I should have guessed that she would be more upset about me being bonded to a 'pig' than about me getting myself grabbed. See, she's a real hippy, into protests and all. I think the sort of experiences she's had with pi...policemen have all been bad ones. I just wish she hadn't taken it out on you...."

Moving them both over to the couch, Jim settled Blair in his lap, knowing that his Guide needed consoling far more than being worried about looking like a little kid.

As for Blair, he simply tucked his face back into Jim's neck, and accepted the comfort with gratitude. How he was going to process the disastrous meeting with his flighty parent, he didn't yet know, but at least he had the strength and constancy of Jim's love to fall back on, and for that he thanked the goddess.

Some while later, when Blair had found some measure of equilibrium, he sat up in Jim's lap and looked into his Sentinel's eyes, finding them to be full of kindness and understanding, rather than the disgust and disapproval he thought that he deserved.

"I'm sorry I fell apart again, man. You must be sick of having a Guide who bursts into tears every five minutes," he whispered, hoping against hope that it wasn't true.

"Link with me, Chief," came the gentle response, "and you'll see that I'm not mad at you at all. You've had a real shit-load of angst dumped on you this morning, which you certainly didn't deserve. I know she's your biological parent, Chief, but she's well short on maternal instinct, babe. I should know," he added quietly. "If it hadn't been for Sally's love and care for me and my brother after my mother walked out, I'd be a whole lot meaner than I am now, and that's saying something."

Allowing Jim to slide into his mind, as he slid into Jim's, Blair was comforted by the love he felt there, but also noted sadness, which had its roots in Jim's motherless childhood. Since he had previously bypassed Jim's deeper personal memories, sure that he wouldn't be allowed access, Blair had to wonder if those pathways were now open to him. He felt the affirmation from his Sentinel in his mind, so he tentatively peeked in to be confronted by the harsh scenes his lover had had to live through, and had locked away.

Flashes of a happy early childhood gave way to bitter disappointment and feelings of guilt with the departure of his mother. Angry scenes with a father determined to make him suppress the senses with which he was gifted, and arguments and bitter competition with a younger brother, spurred on by his father with a view to making the boys tougher. Leaving home to join the army, rising quickly through the ranks to Captain in the Rangers, there were more flashes of a botched mission to Peru. Burned and blackened helicopter wreckage, broken bodies, and finally help from the native Chopec. Guidance offered and accepted from the Chopec shaman, and finally repatriation to a country which didn't care about his successes or his sacrifices.

"Oh Jim," whispered Blair, thoroughly upset now, and not on his own behalf. "I'm so sorry man. I wish I could have been there for you. I'm so sorry that you had to face all that alone."

"It's fine, kid, and I wasn't completely alone. I had Sally looking out for me when I was at home, and Incacha the Chopec shaman was able to help me when the senses came back online in the jungle, although he told me straight away that he wasn't my true Guide. It hasn't been all bad,

baby, and I certainly haven't had to endure the sort of stuff you've had thrust on you, so don't beat yourself up on my behalf. Let's just thank whoever is responsible for these things that we're together now, and can help each other from now on."

"Yeah, you're right, Jim, and I'll try to keep everything in perspective, I promise. Um, do you think we could go shopping now? I think we both need to do something really ordinary, and I'd like to concentrate on something nice but normal, like finding the perfect turkey."

Jim burst into laughter, completely disarmed by his lover's ingenuous change of subject.

"Only you, Chief! Only you!" he gasped when he'd gotten his amusement under control.

"Come on, let's get showered then hit the shops. Sounds like a real plan, baby," and he stood up, placing Blair back on his feet, and urged his Guide towards the bathroom.

Several hours later, Jim and Blair staggered into the loft, arms laden with grocery bags and a handful of post that Jim had picked up on the way up. Still to be carried up from the truck bed was a set of self-assembly shelves for the office that Jim had picked out to supplement the small bookcase which was already filled to overflowing with Blair's books and papers.

Blair started to unpack the grocery bags, looking much better now, although still somewhat introspective, mulling over Naomi's disruptive visit.

Jim came over to help for a while, then left Blair to it while he went down to bring the flat-packed shelves up, since he wanted to assemble them that afternoon. He figured that sorting out his books and papers would give Blair something else to think about, after which he fully intended to distract his Guide in other ways, such as making out on the sofa in front of the TV.

It wasn't until the groceries were all put away - including a pretty darned perfect turkey for the freezer - and Jim was done with wrestling with the shelving, that he finally got around to checking the post.

Blair was in the office, actually humming to himself again while he sorted through his notes and rearranged his book collection to his satisfaction. He stopped what he was doing as soon as he heard Jim's surprised exclamation from the other room, and went out to see what was wrong.

"Well damn! Unbelievable! Where the hell does he get off with stuff like this?" And the angry Sentinel threw an expensive-looking embossed card and envelope down on the counter.

"Are you all right Jim? Can I do anything?" Blair asked worriedly, hurrying to his partner's side.

Taking several deep breaths to get himself under some sort of control, Jim said, "It's nothing, Chief. Well, nothing you should worry about, and I'm not going to worry about it either. It's just my father butting in again out of the blue when I least expect it. Sort of like your Mom, huh?"

Sitting down on one of the kitchen chairs, he squeezed the hand that Blair offered him, and continued. "You might as well know what it's all about, babe. It's just that my beloved father, damn his eyes, has obviously decided that now I'm a fully bonded –; read 'important' –; Alpha Sentinel, he now wants to invite me to a Thanksgiving bash at the country club, no doubt to show me off to his business cronies!" and he tossed the fancy invitation over to Blair.

"Could be worse, I suppose", he went on. "At least he's invited my Guide as well. Trouble is, reading between the lines, I think he may believe that you're a woman, Chief!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Blair worriedly. "I suppose Blair is pretty much a unisex name. I think that's why Naomi chose it in advance. It wouldn't matter what sex of baby she gave birth to, the name would be OK for either," he finished ruefully. "Do you want to go?" he added. "After all, it is your family...."

"Not a chance, baby. I'm not parading around for a bunch of stuffed shirts just because I'm now 'acceptable' in their social circle. And I wouldn't put you through that sort of trial either. I want our first shared Thanksgiving celebration to be in our own home, just the two of us, and I want to see you stuffing that turkey, love! The last thing I'm willing to do is jump through hoops just because my old man wants me to." And with that, he pulled Blair into his arms for a deep and loving kiss, holding the smaller body close, and revelling in the warmth and love he could feel emanating from deep within his Guide's mind.

After a few more minutes of cuddles, they broke apart, and Blair suggested that he prepare a light supper since it appeared to him that they were undoubtedly going to have a blow-out the following day, judging by the huge amount of provisions Jim had encouraged him to buy. Nodding in agreement, Jim set the table in readiness, while Blair prepared the fixings for his delicious 'all in' omelettes; veggie for him, and with added bacon and sausage for Jim.

After the meal was finished and the clean-up done, Jim seized his Guide in passing and squeezed his torso with a chuckle. "You know, Chief, you're beginning to fill out nicely now. I don't think you're ever going to get fat, but it's good that your ribs have a bit of cover now. Much more comfortable to cuddle up to...." he finished, attempting a comically seductive tone.

Blair giggled happily, and shivered a little when Jim found a couple of his 'tickle spots', squeaking when Sentinel fingers began to attack in earnest.

Seconds later, he was on the couch, squirming and laughing until tears streamed down his face, and he cried, "Uncle!" while he still had the breath to speak.

Jim, face wreathed in smiles, pulled him up and straightened Blair's layers of clothing which had twisted every which way.

"How's about you choose a film to watch, baby? I'll go and get us a couple of beers, and I'm thinking a nice evening making out in front of the TV sounds just the ticket." He was more than

pleased when Blair smiled and nodded his agreement with nary a tremor; further evidence that he was growing more and more relaxed and trusting in his Sentinel's company.

A couple of hours later, having watched an occasional action scene from 'Iron Man' in between some serious necking, Blair was settled down on the sofa with his head on a pillow on Jim's lap. As usual, the Sentinel was carding his fingers through Blair's soft curls; an action that both soothed his senses and his Guide. He looked down with an indulgent smile when he heard the first soft snore telling him that Blair had fallen asleep, probably exhausted with the events of a day that had more than a few ups and downs for both of them.

He thought about Naomi's visit, and the upset she had caused, not so much caring about what she'd said about him –; he'd heard far worse during his work at the PD –; but how she'd appeared to believe that her son was incapable of recovering from his ordeal without her support and some weird new-age meditation shit. Not only that, but he hadn't discerned any real empathy in her for Blair's suffering, only a barely disguised disgust – a belief that he 'hadn't fought hard enough' which was a classic reaction from the less sympathetic towards perceived rape victims. Added to that her very real dismay at the notion of bonding, especially to a 'pig', and it was no wonder that Blair had been reduced to tears once again.

Clamping down hard on his rising irritation when he heard a small moan of distress from the sleeping Guide, he continued with his stroking until Blair settled back down.

His thoughts moving away from Naomi to his own parent, and once again he was hard put to not explode with indignation at his father's high-handed attitude towards his estranged son. How the man had the gall to send a formal invitation to his society bash, and expect Jim to come running, towing his new Guide along for the ride was completely beyond belief as far as Jim was concerned. Smiling wickedly, he contemplated for a moment the reactions of his Dad's business buddies if they were introduced to Blair wearing the 'party boy' sub gear the kid had been forced to wear –; though god forbid he'd ever make Blair suffer that indignity again –; but the image of spluttering, red faced dismay coming from the stuffed shirts held a certain charm nonetheless.

Stifling a yawn himself, he decided it was time to turn in, so he gently roused Blair enough to steer him towards the bathroom, still more than half asleep. After doing the necessary, he virtually carried his Guide up to the bedroom, thanking the gods that he worked out as much as he did, since even skinny, Blair was a fair weight to manoeuvre when more or less unconscious.

Stripping them both down to their underwear, he got them both settled in bed, with him spooned comfortably behind and around his Guide, and dropped almost immediately into a deep sleep.

After a few days of relative quiet at the PD in terms of criminal activity, Thursday morning dawned bright and clear in the sort of rare dry and sunny late Fall day almost unheard of in Cascade.

Jim awoke from a deep and restful sleep, to look up at his Guide, who, propped up on one elbow, was watching him, face soft and relaxed from sleep. He smiled up at the younger man's open and plainly adoring expression, and murmured, "Hey beautiful, what's up?"

Although it was not altogether unknown for Blair to wake first, it was pretty much always the case that Jim woke first, to spend long moments gazing at his Guide before gently waking him with tender caresses. Now it was Blair's turn, and he wordlessly reached out and stroked his Sentinel's broad and muscular chest with a gentle hand.

"I was just looking at you, and thinking how lucky I am to have such a gorgeous and kind man as my lover and Sentinel. It's more than I could ever have hoped for, and definitely more than I deserve. I keep dumping my emotional breakdown shit on you, and you keep looking out for me and comforting me. What can I do for you to repay you?"

Deeply touched, Jim reached up and pulled his lover into his arms, rolling them over so that the smaller body lay on top of him.

"What makes you think you don't repay me every single day, baby? Just having you with me, grounding me and making sure I get the best of food, and everything else 'sentinel-friendly' that you think I need is more than enough. On top of that, how could I not care for you? You're beautiful, smart and generous. There's no 'owing' or 'repaying' between us, lover. We just 'are'. A true Sentinel / Guide, Jim / Blair pairing."

Seeing that his words had had the effect of making Blair somewhat teary-eyed, he distracted him by pulling his face down for a kiss, and then added with a chuckle, "Tell you what, baby -; I think you'll be doing more than enough 'repaying' when you entertain me by letting me watch you stuff that turkey! How's about we get downstairs and start looking out the ingredients you'll need?"

Giggling in response, Blair nodded, and bent to kiss his lover again before sliding off the muscular body to sit on the side of the bed. "Can we have a shower together first?" he asked, still shy about requesting any act of intimacy between them, even though he knew Jim was always happy to oblige.

"Just what I was thinking, babe," responded Jim, an enormous smile in place, as he knew that Blair's diffident suggestion actually implied that he would like to pleasure his Sentinel in some way. And since he was still prone to the occasional flashback in bed, he was less likely to instigate a sexual act in that situation.

Taking Blair's hand, they went downstairs together, and while Blair took care of business and started the shower, Jim sorted out some comfortable sweats for them, since he had no intention of doing anything else but relaxing in the loft today.

When he entered the bathroom, he looked his fill at his Guide, who stood before him quite naked, although he was blushing fiercely and couldn't quite meet Jim's eyes.

Running his eyes appreciatively over the slender figure, Jim was pleased to see that most of Blair's scars were fading nicely, although they would never be completely hidden from sentinel eyes. Tattoos notwithstanding, he looked good enough to eat as far as Jim was concerned.

Stepping forward, Jim was moved to say, "Hey there, beautiful, what's a gorgeous body like you doing in my bathroom?" And, cupping Blair's face with large and gentle hands, he lowered his face to take the succulent mouth in a kiss of pure delight. Pushing back a little, he turned the smaller man and urged him to step in under the warm water, moving in behind him and reaching for the lightly scented shower gel.

"Please, let me?" whispered Blair. Holding out his hand for the container, he smiled contentedly when Jim held it out to him.

"Sure, babe, anything you want."

With permission granted, he began to wash his Sentinel with careful hands, gradually making the touches more intimate until Jim, and Jim's erection, were more than ready for the loving mouth that worked him until he came with a cry of pure passion.

Rising to his feet, Blair looked up into Jim's face to see satisfaction, pleasure and love all there for the Guide to see.

When he had recovered enough to talk, Jim spoke, voice deep with emotion. "Thank you, baby. That was so good. Can I do the same for you?"

Blair was a little taken aback, because although Jim was only too willing to hold him and kiss and caress him to ecstasy, especially as he was still so wary about being penetrated, he had only once offered to actually take Blair's cock in his mouth, and Blair had assumed that the idea was slightly repugnant for Sentinel senses, especially with an abused Guide.

"Uh Jim, are you sure? I mean, yeah, I'd really like that, but I didn't think it was your scene, man. I mean, what with your senses, and me being what I am and all--"

"What you are, babe, is someone who deserves to be loved and cherished every day of your life, and if I haven't made a habit of offering you a blow job before, it was only because I wanted to be sure you were ready for it, lover, not because I find it distasteful. So, what do you say?"

And at Blair's stunned nod of acceptance, he did just that, until his Guide was almost boneless with satisfaction.

Quickly washing themselves off, because the hot water was rapidly running out, they dried off and dressed in the warm sweats, moving to the kitchen for fresh coffee and bagels before Blair, donning Jim's flowery apron, set to in making his from-scratch chestnut stuffing with an endearing frown of concentration on his face.

Guessing it was better to keep out of his Guide's way for the time being, Jim busied himself by laying the table with the best china and silverware that hadn't seen the light of day since the divorce. Frankly, he'd been surprised that Carolyn hadn't insisted on taking it with her, but was grateful now for the oversight.

He even produced a bottle of good red Oregon wine to go in the crystal glasses he unearthed from the depths of the cabinet.

That done, he turned on the TV and flipped through a few channels until he found the NFL game he wanted to watch, and settled down comfortably with his attention straying between the sports action and the bustling activity in the kitchen, which, for the enamoured Sentinel, was far more captivating.

As it turned out, stuffing the large turkey proved to be as entertaining as expected for the pair of them, and Blair was red-faced with exertion by the time it was completed to his satisfaction, but grinning happily from ear to ear while Jim applauded from the sofa.

With that done, and the bird in the oven, Blair came over to the sofa to have a cuddling session before returning to the kitchen to prepare the vegetables.

"Great work, Chief!. You really are an excellent turkey stuffer!" joked Jim, ruffling his Guide's hair affectionately.

"Actually," Blair confessed, "I've only done it once before, 'cos Naomi didn't really celebrate Thanksgiving as such. We just used to muck in with whatever was going on in whatever culture or country we were in at the time, so all the celebrations sort of ran together. That went for the food as well, so I got used to having all sorts of weird combinations. It's good to be able to do something completely traditional for once," he finished with a smile, missing the brief flash of sympathy that his words had elicited in Jim on his behalf.

Quickly stifling his momentary dismay, Jim grinned back and replied with a heart-felt, "That's as may be, babe, but I can see lots of Thanksgiving turkeys in our future, and you'll be stuffing every one of them!"

"Oh joy!" came the cheerful response, as Blair managed to snag a pillow and whap his Sentinel over the head with it before even considering whether he should be so forward. Taken by surprise, Jim beamed in genuine pleasure before retaliating in kind until a full-scale pillow fight was in progress. This eventually led to a running battle around the sofa until Jim, using his superior height and strength, grabbed his Guide and lifted him bodily over the sofa back and dumped him in a giggling heap on the cushions.

"OK, enough!" he said, somewhat breathlessly. "Older guy here, so have some pity!"

Blair gaped at him for a second from his position on the sofa, and then broke into fits of laughter such that Jim had never before heard from the younger man and he just had to join in, it was so contagious in its unaffected joyfulness.

Once they had themselves back under control, and wiped away the tears running down their flushed faces, Jim cuddled his Guide to him in pure delight, before standing him back on his feet and shoving him gently towards the kitchen with a light swat to the attractive ass. "Back to the galley with you, O Master Chef, and prepare my veggies!"

Grinning and sticking his tongue out at Jim from over his shoulder, Blair went back to the kitchen to do just that, concentrating too hard for a while to realise that his Sentinel was being beset by several thoughts and emotions, all of them to do with his Guide, and all of them good.

Jim was overjoyed with Blair's response to his teasing, as the young man was still so nervous in so many ways. The totally spontaneous pillow fight that his Guide had instigated, plus his genuine joy and laughter warmed Jim's heart to the extent that he felt a lump in his throat from the emotion. Swallowing down the maudlin reaction before he could upset the happy soul puttering around with veggies and chopping boards, he returned to his TV / Blair-watching activities until it was time for Blair's next break from his voluntary kitchen chores.

Some hours later, around mid-afternoon, the sumptuous meal was ready and set out on the festive table. Blair was somewhat tired, a bit sweaty and very dishevelled, but extraordinarily proud and happy to have cooked the whole spread, and he grinned at Jim, glowing with a real sense of achievement.

For his part, Jim was almost overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude, happiness and honest-to-goodness sap as he gazed from his Guide to the repast spread out in front of him.

"Well, Chief, all I can say is thank you and well done, which doesn't even begin to express how good this is. Sit down now, and I'll pour the wine, then you can do the honours and carve that there turkey!"

"Um, Jim if you don't mind, I'd rather you did that," replied Blair a little shame-faced. "I've never yet actually carved anything with any success, even the only other turkey I cooked. Unless you want a disaster area on your plate, I think you should do it."

"Sure Chief, I can do that," replied Jim cheerfully, and, using sentinel precision, sliced the bird and dished out ample portions for both of them, plus generous helpings of the chestnut stuffing. Add to that an assortment of vegetables and some very good gravy, and they were good to go.

Picking up his wine glass, Jim proposed a toast, much to his blushing partner's shy pleasure.

"To us, Chief. To a happy life and future together, and to plenty more stuffed turkeys!"

"Amen to that, Jim," came the quiet but firm response, and with that they settled in to eat.

By early evening they had eaten their fill, stored the leftovers and shared the washing up, even though Jim had said he would do it himself, since Blair had done all the cooking. Blair had countered that by saying that if they both did it, it would be finished much quicker and they could kick back and relax for the rest of the evening. Still feeling a little guilty, because after all, he'd been kicking back all day watching his lover do all the work, Jim allowed himself to be persuaded, promising himself he would make it up to his lover later on.

Settling down in front of the TV, and enjoying the cosy warmth from the fire Jim had lit earlier in the day, they found a couple of films they hadn't seen before and snuggled up together, relaxing into the sofa cushions.

Jim wasn't surprised, or upset, when his Guide dozed off after a while, head dropping onto Jim's shoulder. Knowing Blair deserved a nap after all the kitchen duties, he gently manoeuvred the lax body to lie with his head on a pillow on Jim's lap –; a position Jim was happy to assume since it left him free to stroke the soft curls. Indeed, he would be content to do it every night, given the chance.

Relaxing contentedly and feeling comfortably full, Jim leaned his head back and half watched the TV whilst tuning in automatically to monitor his Guide. Feeling heavy-eyed himself due to the soporific effect of Blair's soft snores and snuffles, he was just dozing off when he went suddenly to full alert, knowing he was just about to have some very unwelcome visitors.

Gently sliding out from beneath Blair, and placing another cushion under his Guide's head in the hope that he would continue to sleep undisturbed, Jim quickly and silently moved to the door which he opened with a flourish before his father had a chance to knock.

Somewhat taken aback, but quickly recovering, the older man glanced between his older son and Steven, Jim's younger brother who stood at his side, and spoke with an air of inborn authority.

"Aren't you going to invite us in, Jimmy? Surely it's the least you can do after ignoring the invitation to my Thanksgiving party."

Taking in the men's formal attire, and assuming they were on their way home from the country club, Jim stepped aside with bad grace, and held the door open for them to enter, but didn't invite them further into the loft than the entrance hall.

"This isn't a good time Dad. I'm sorry I didn't reply to your invitation, but I didn't receive it until Saturday, and I'd already made my plans. I admit I should have given you a call, but considering you've had no time for me in years, I hardly thought you'd miss me this time."

William Ellison pursed his lips and considered his answer, knowing that his son had a point. He hadn't had much inclination to contact Jimmy after his return from Peru, even though in all

honesty he had been sincerely glad that his son still lived. Instead he had concentrated his attention on the son who did adhere to his wishes, and groomed Steven to take over his business empire.

However, the change in status which bonding bestowed on a sentinel made him reconsider his attitude towards Jimmy, and he began to realise what an asset having a fully bonded Alpha Sentinel son could be for his social standing both at work and at the country club.

"You may have a point there, Jimmy, but the fact remains that as your father I expect a certain level of courtesy from you. I want to see this young lady you've bonded with, to see if she's the right class of person for you, or if you'll have to keep her away from social functions."

Almost lost for words at his father's self-centred and arrogant attitude, Jim reacted instinctively. Grabbing the man's sleeve, he dragged him over to the couch where Blair slept on in innocence. Hissing almost under his breath so as not to wake his Guide in his fury, he grated out, "There you go Dad. That's my Blair. Not a woman, but a beautiful and intelligent young man, who has done me the greatest honour in consenting to bond with me. This is the person I wanted to spend Thanksgiving with, because *this* is my family now, by choice. Now get out, and don't come round again until you are prepared to act with respect towards my Guide!"

So saying, he pulled his father back to the door, totally ignoring both his and Steven's shocked and bewildered expressions as he pushed them ungraciously out in to the hall.

"Jimmy! How could you? What were you thinking?" spluttered William in confusion.

"Leave him be," Steven said to him, while glancing at his furious elder brother. "It's nothing to do with us, Dad, and if it's what Jim wants, you can't do anything about it. Come on, let's go." And casting another glance at Jim, this one full of apology, he steered his still spluttering father towards the elevator.

Breathing hard, and desperately clutching at every last vestige of control, Jim finally stepped back into the loft only when he had heard the elevator reach the first floor, and his father and brother leave the building.

Taking a last deep breath, he turned towards the couch to see a sleepy and bewildered Blair peering up at him, hair every which way, and an adorable expression of confusion plastered over his face.

"Jim, man, are you OK? What happened? Have I missed something?" he mumbled, trying to get his head and mouth into sync.

Immediately relaxing at the sight of his cute and mussed Guide, Jim was able to respond with a smile.

"It's OK, baby, really. We just had some unexpected visitors, and I got rid of them as soon as I could."

Suddenly more alert, and frowning in concern, his Guide replied, "What aren't you telling me? Has something happened to upset you? Is it to do with me?" this last whispered in fear, as he could plainly read his Sentinel's reactions to his words.

Jim sighed deeply, and moved over to take the slender body into his arms. Hugging Blair close, he decided that he might as well tell all, so that they could deal with it and move on.

"First off, baby, you did nothing wrong. It's just my Dad," he began, putting a finger up to Blair's lips in a gesture that implied his lover should remain silent for now.

"While you were sleeping, he and my brother Steven called to take me to task for not going to the country club bash. OK, I know I should have called, but considering we didn't get the invitation until Saturday, I don't think we should worry too much about that. Trouble is, my Dad has a huge hang-up about his social standing, and apparently decided that parading me and my Guide around would gain him masses of Brownie points, just like we thought. I'm sorry, love, but I never even considered that he'd follow up his invite with a visit."

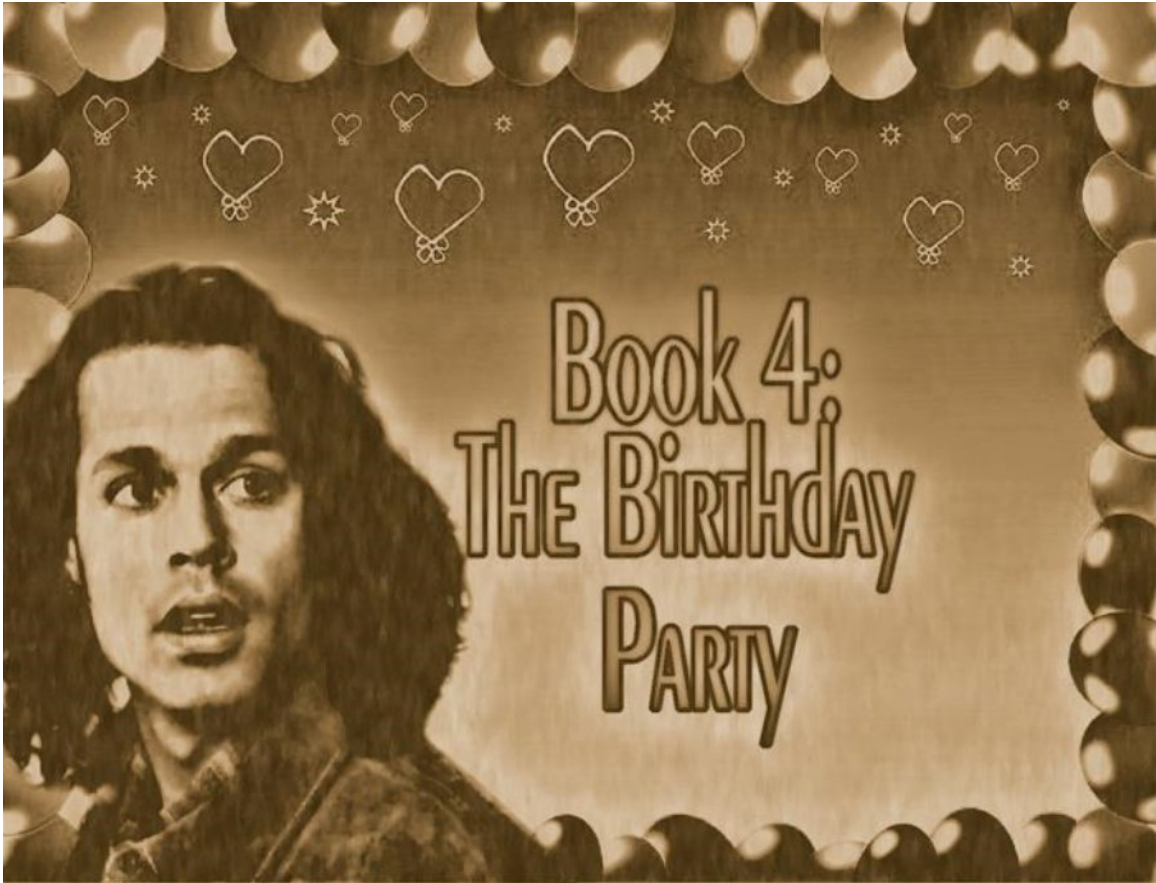
Head lowered in shame, Blair whispered, "He saw me, didn't he? And instead of some personable girl he saw a scarred and beat-up kid. I'm right aren't I?" he continued, voice deepening even further in his self-abasement. "Oh gods, Jim, what can I do to make it right for you? I'm destroying all your credibility here, man." And he couldn't stop the single tear that escaped from beneath his closed eyelids.

That was the last straw for Jim, and he grabbed his Guide by the upper arms and shook him firmly but gently, not wishing to hurt him, but to attract his undivided attention.

"That's quite enough of that, babe. It's his problem if he can't deal with me having a male Guide, and same goes for his cronies and anyone else. I don't care, never have, about meeting with his approval. Jeez, Chief, we're talking about a guy who couldn't even bring himself to contact his own son after said son was brought back alive from Peru! Why the hell should I care about his opinion?"

Gentling his tone he continued, now pulling his beloved partner into a warm and reaffirming hug. "Between you and me, Chief, I think parents are way over-rated."

Snuggling into his Sentinel's broad and comforting chest, Blair couldn't help but agree.



The Birthday Party

April: Hargrove Hall. Blair:

With a jaw-cracking yawn, Blair stretched his arms out in front of him and rotated his neck and shoulders to loosen them up. He had been sitting at his desk for several hours now, doing not only his own research, but also grading some test papers for Eli, as well as following up with some phone calls in his role as Eli's assistant. It was a position he was proud to have been offered as it made him responsible for much of the background organisation for the professor's upcoming expedition to Borneo which would commence in less than two months' time. For a fleeting moment, he felt a pang of jealousy that he wasn't going to take part in the expedition, but it was gone almost as soon as it occurred to him, as he had so much to be grateful for now. Although the professor's absence would alleviate some of the pressure on Blair, he knew he would miss his mentor as the trip was likely to last for up to a year.

Sitting back, he realised it was almost time for Jim to pick him up for lunch, then an afternoon spent with Jim at Cascade PD awaited. He smiled again. With practice, he and Jim were now able to spend at least a morning apart without too many problems; and now he had his own little space to retreat to should a potentially difficult situation arise.

With so much to do, and so little time in which to do it, Blair supposed he should be feeling at least a little antsy, but he simply smiled to himself, and allowed himself to ponder on how his life had changed so dramatically. Busy was most definitely good.

He looked around his tiny workspace, which was really no more than a cleared area in a basement store room, otherwise known as Artefact Storage Room #3.

As with so many other things at Rainier which involved Blair, it was Eli who was instrumental in helping him to find a small niche for himself. A safe place where he could do his own work as well as his mentor's and have a little privacy for the one-to-one tutorial sessions he held. He was ruefully aware that both Jim and Eli realised that he was still unable to cope with large gatherings without his Sentinel's protection, as not only did he find it very tiring continuously having to block out the emotions swirling around him, but he was not yet immune to the occasional flashback which could embarrass him at the most inopportune moments. For those reasons, lecturing was out of the question, but he found he was able to cope with private tutorials for carefully selected students.

He stood and stretched again, and wandered around the tiny office space, looking at the artefacts scattered amongst his piles of papers and thinking about Eli. Dr Eli Stoddard, friend, mentor and father figure.

Dr Stoddard was a world-renowned anthropologist, yet he had found time to befriend – well, virtually adopt – a small, hyper-active and very smart sixteen year old student, who was having such a hard time connecting with a peer group that was older, often taller, and generally not so smart.

Having no objection to becoming a 'father figure', Eli had been delighted with the boy's intelligence and charisma, and had encouraged him in his studies such that he had completed and submitted his Masters thesis at age twenty.

It was Eli who had alerted the police to Blair's disappearance when he was kidnapped, and, when the student failed to turn up, he took it upon himself to pack up Blair's possessions and papers and store them in his garage until such time as Blair reappeared.

Once Blair had been rescued from the clutches of the sadistic Galbini, it was Eli who had arranged for Blair to work part-time as his research assistant, and, when Blair had timidly put forward his request to study criminology and pursue a Masters in Forensic Anthropology, it was Eli who had set the wheels in motion so that Blair could return to Rainier on a flexible basis, so that he would be available to work with Jim.

According to Sentinel / Guide Department guidelines, it was understood that a fully bonded Sentinel / Guide pairing would best fulfil their potential if both partners were fully trained in their specific work environment, whether in medicine, police work or the fire service, for example. Because of this, Captain Banks was happy for Blair to return to Rainier and study

courses that would enable him to integrate more fully with the PD, and aid his partner even more than he already had. It was Simon's hope that eventually Blair would turn his impressive intellect and empathic ability towards the field of profiling, but that would depend on the young man's progress in the mental health department.

The only thing that Blair hadn't completed was the firearms course. He had a deep-seated hatred of guns, and had pleaded his case with both Jim and Simon, albeit very nervously. He had explained that he wouldn't need to carry, since he could always call upon his command of kinetic energy as a projecting empath in order to protect Jim, innocent bystanders, and himself should the need arise.

Now, a year on from that fateful kidnapping, Blair was as contented with his academic career as he was with the other elements in his life.

As if Jim Ellison could be classified as an 'element'!

His beloved Sentinel and companion, Jim was the centre of his universe. So in tune with each other after six months of partnership both at work and at home, Blair simply couldn't envisage an existence without him.

Jim was his rescuer, lover and bonded Sentinel all rolled into one and the single most important person in his life. However, despite Blair's indubitable hero worship, he wasn't foolish enough to put Jim on a pedestal, even if the man did resemble a Greek god. Jim could be short-tempered, controlling and just plain bloody-minded at times – in other words, quite human rather than Superman. But he was also caring, loving and so gentle with his damaged Guide that Blair could get teary-eyed just thinking about the good things Jim had done for him.

In all honesty, he knew that he had helped Jim too. The Alpha Sentinel was now even more in control of his senses than ever before, and his arrest and conviction rate was phenomenal. Most of this was definitely due to his bonding with a top-rated empath and Guide, even if said Guide still had major problems in accepting his self worth.

At least the pair was mostly able to concentrate on their own case load in Major Crimes now, as the transfer of four more Sentinel / Guide pairs into the PD had meant that they weren't now on call to other departments except where joint investigations took place.

Blair considered that aspect with a little satisfaction, and some disquiet.

He had developed a theory soon after bonding with Jim that it was Jim's influence as an Alpha which drew other pairings to Cascade, even to a certain extent before he was bonded.

The bond with Blair seemed to have accelerated the influx, although it had taken a lot to convince his Sentinel of the apparent reason for it. Blair, very worried about offending Jim, but believing they had to face up to their influence as an Alpha pairing, had taken his courage in both hands and approached Director Adam Kingsley at the Sentinel / Guide Dept. With that

man's enthusiastic support, Jim was reluctantly forced to accept that he was now nominal head of a growing sentinel / guide population, which meant that both he and Blair were inevitably looked to for advice and leadership.

This wasn't a problem for Jim as an ex Army Captain, except for a certain nuisance factor, but Blair found it hard to act as mentor to other Guides and empaths, believing himself to be too young and inexperienced for the job. Despite this, he gritted his teeth and tried his best, not wishing to let his partner down, especially as Director Kingsley had smugly informed them that together they formed one of the most highly ranked pairings in living memory.

Because of this, and, more importantly, simply for love of Jim, Blair voluntarily found time to go to the Department for therapy to cope with his PTSD, and for training in the use and control of his ability to wield kinetic energy. More often than not he was accompanied to these sessions by Jim himself, as the Sentinel hated to be apart from his Guide any more than necessary.

Considering the 'power' he had – which Jim was always referring to somewhat wryly as 'The Force', and teasing Blair with references to 'Young Skywalker' – Blair was happy that, although he had been forced to use it on several occasions since the Delaney case, no one had been more than temporarily incapacitated. There had been no deaths except for the traumatic first manifestation when he defended himself against the crooked Vice detective who was attacking him.

Although still horrified at what he had done, he was finally beginning to accept what he was constantly told by Jim and all his friends and supporters: the incident was a tragic combination of inexperience and bad luck, leading to accidental death. With the training he had put himself through since then, he was more confident in his control so he could use his ability to defend his partner, himself and anyone else in danger.

He smiled somewhat ruefully when he recalled one such incident.

A few weeks ago, when they were leaving the PD with Simon Banks to go and grab some early lunch, a man had rushed up to the Captain, and drawn a gun. Pointing it at Simon and snarling in rage, it was Blair's automatic reaction that had thrown the would-be attacker backwards, so that the shot intended to assassinate Simon went wild. Quickly overpowering the downed man, Simon's respect for Blair had risen a hundredfold, and from then on the empath was able to tell that any gruffness from the Captain towards him these days was mostly assumed and only for show.

Humming to himself, Blair started packing away his books and papers into his backpack, knowing that his ever-punctual Sentinel would be ringing on the dot of 12.30 pm.

Sure enough, as he put the last of the marked test papers into his in-tray, his cell phone rang, and Jim's warm voice greeted him.

"Hi baby, all packed up and ready to go? I've picked up some subs from the deli to save time, 'cos we've got a briefing to go to this afternoon. That OK with you?"

"Sure Jim. I'm ready now. Shall I meet you on the steps to the hall?"

"Yeah, that'd be good, lover. I'm about five minutes away," was the response. "See you in a few," and Jim terminated the call.

Grinning happily, Blair locked his store room-cum-office, and ran up the stairs to the front doors of Hargrove Hall.

Jim:

Driving to Hargrove Hall to pick up his Guide and lover, Jim was busy thinking about the surprise party he was planning for the young man, since Blair's 21st birthday last May had passed unnoticed as he was already undergoing the sadistic training regime designed to turn him into Galbini's sex slave. Jim intended to organise a special occasion which would both demonstrate how much Blair was wanted and loved, and which would hopefully also compensate him a little for the lost six months during which he had suffered abuse worse than most people could possibly imagine.

He smiled to himself when he considered how many folks genuinely liked his little Guide, and how enthusiastic the response had been to his tentative enquiries. Eli himself and Blair's own students were more than happy to indulge the young man, and there were many from the PD who were already planning their own contributions, such as Megan, Joel, Rafe, H and Rhonda, and of course Simon and his son Daryl, who was greatly impressed by the empath, considering him to be 'really cool'!

Added to that were the Sentinels and Guides who were now part of the Cascade 'Clan' as Blair liked to call it, and the personnel from the Sentinel / Guide Department who Blair had also won over. Yep, it certainly had the potential to be quite a big occasion.

The downside, however, was the lack of relatives attending.

Jim knew Blair was still desperately hurt by his mother's apparent abandonment of her only child. When she had called in unexpectedly, Naomi had been appalled and upset by Blair's bonding with a 'pig', even more than she was horrified about his kidnapping and forced sexual slavery, such that she had never been in touch since storming out of the loft that day. Blair had no idea where she was, since she wasn't responding to any contact number he held.

Not only that, but Jim's own father could not bring himself to show any interest in his son and his son's new Guide. William had been disgusted by the fact that Jim had bonded with a male Guide; a complete nobody at that and damaged to boot. Said Guide's outstanding empathic

ability notwithstanding, the elder Ellison wanted nothing to do with a fatherless boy who could do nothing to enhance William's social standing at the country club or in the business world.

Although Jim's brother Steven had called a couple of times, even that relationship was going nowhere fast, and Jim was reconciled to the fact that his family would remain estranged from him and Blair.

For the most part, Jim was unconcerned, since he had effectively walked out on his family years ago when he joined the army, but he knew that Blair felt horribly guilty for being an additional obstacle to any reconciliation between Jim and his father and brother. It was almost impossible to convince the young man that that was how Jim liked it, and he had no intention of trying to paper over the cracks in a doomed relationship.

Shunting aside thoughts of unsympathetic relatives, Jim smiled to himself as he contemplated his main present for his young Guide. He had found a decent pre-owned Ford which he had had completely checked out and overhauled, and which was being stored for now in Joel's garage. He knew that Blair had a driver's licence, even though he'd never been able to afford a car of his own as a student. What Jim wanted was for him to have some independence rather than having to either rely on Jim for lifts, or Cascade's public transport system, which wasn't the most reliable in the world, and Jim always worried on the rare occasions Blair was forced to use it.

Smiling in anticipation of Blair's reaction when he saw the car, Jim congratulated himself somewhat smugly on the purchase. Anything that brought smiles to his lover's face and gladness to his heart was well worth the effort, and Jim benefited also from the overflow of joy, since his Guide's nature was such that he had to share all his happiness and affection with his Sentinel.

As for Jim himself, he couldn't get over how lucky he felt to be the object of Blair's adulation and total devotion. He could tell through their shared link that Blair's love for him was all-consuming, and he thanked TPTB every day for bringing the young man into his life. In return, he adored his Guide, loving him for his resilience, his innate goodness and his reliability even when half scared out of his mind. Blair was gentle and self-effacing, and totally unaware of his ability to win over so many of the people he came into contact with, being completely lacking in any form of egoism.

Feeling the need to see and hold his beloved Guide, Jim pulled up at the foot of the steps outside Hargrove Hall to spot the object of his musings launch himself down the stairs to throw himself into Jim's arms as soon as he could get down from the truck.

"Missed you! Missed you so much!" Blair was saying, arms tight around his Sentinel's waist, and face buried in Jim's neck, completely oblivious of passing students.

Laughing happily, Jim pushed him away a little, before saying teasingly, "You sure about that, Chief? 'Cos I thought you'd be so caught up in that academic stuff you'd never notice the time...."

"Never! Never happen," replied Blair fervently, rubbing his cheek against Jim's broad chest, then lifting his face up for the kiss he knew Jim would give him.

Chuckling, Jim obliged, and then lifted his smaller partner up and into the passenger seat. Climbing in himself, he said, "Subs are under your seat, love. I got you tuna on rye, so I hope that's OK. Large diet coke's to share."

"That's fine, Jim. Oh man, what's that you got for yourself? Looks like you got half the cow in that reuben."

"Only because the sandwich girl fancies me, kiddo," came the joking response. "You should see the pathetic portion everyone else was getting!"

"Huh uh," was the only reply, as Blair took a large bite out of his tuna on rye. Unwrapping Jim's sandwich, he handed it over so the Sentinel could grab a bite as he drove.

"So, what's the meeting all about this afternoon?" asked Blair in between mouthfuls. "It sounded pretty important. Is it another joint investigation?"

"Yeah, I think so," said Jim thoughtfully. "Simon was looking a bit rattled when he told me this morning, and he didn't elaborate, so I'm thinking there's something fairly heavy-duty going on."

Glancing a little nervously at his partner, Blair worried his bottom lip for a moment before replying. "It's odd, but I've had a sort of feeling that something big involving us was due to happen. I wouldn't like to call it precognition or anything, but I've certainly felt uneasy. Gods, I don't want to get even weirder!" he finished with a sigh.

"Don't sweat it, Chief. Weirdness notwithstanding, you're still my favourite oddball!"

"Gee, thanks a bunch, man," replied Blair with a giggle, and returned to his sandwich feeling a little less troubled.

On arriving at the PD parking garage, Jim collected together the sandwich wrappings for disposal, and helped his Guide down from the truck. Although Blair was more or less back to full physical health, and was back in the correct weight range for his height, Jim just liked the excuse to get his hands on the slender body, and Blair certainly didn't complain.

They made their way to the elevator with Blair in his usual position, tucked tightly in to Jim's side, and entered the car with several other uniforms.

Although there were still those who disliked the PDAs so openly used by Jim and Blair, the coming of several more Sentinel / Guide pairs meant that such tactile behaviours were observed far more regularly now, and most of the PD personnel were inured to it. Only on very rare occasions did someone make an adverse comment, and, once confronted by any Sentinel within hearing range, they tended not to do it again.

Arriving in the MCU bullpen, they saw that the only detectives there were Rafe and H, Joel and Megan being out following up leads on their own cases, and most other personnel out of office. Simon, poking his head out of his office door, yelled at them in his customary fashion, but by this time Blair no longer cringed in anxiety, knowing that the big man now at least tolerated him, even if he couldn't call it real friendship yet.

With his hand resting comfortably in the small of his Guide's back, Jim steered him towards Banks's office as soon as they had hung up their jackets and dumped Blair's backpack at their shared desk. Knocking and entering, they took the seats indicated in front of Simon's desk, and waited while the older man rolled one of his favourite cigars around in his large hands – a telling clue that what he had to say was most likely unwelcome.

After a moment, he looked up at the pair and said candidly, "What I'm going to ask you is not going to make your day. It's not a done deal, but I've been asked to point out to you that, should you choose not to participate, the success of the investigation – or set-up, if you prefer – will be much more dubious. Even so, I'm not ordering you to take part, just to listen to what the other team members have to say at the briefing and make up your minds then. What do you say?"

"Well, that sure sounds ominous, Captain," said Jim, a frown settling between his brows. "Do you want to give us a heads-up now, or leave it to us to hear the whole story at the briefing? I don't know about Blair, but I think it's better to hear the whole thing at once. What do you think, Chief?"

Licking his lips nervously, Blair spoke softly. "I think you're right, Jim. Hearing just the few facts Captain Banks can tell us will only make me more apprehensive, I think. I'd rather get it over with in one go, if that's OK?" he finished, glancing questioningly between both older men.

Simon nodded, as did Jim. "Fair enough, kid. If you and Jim will come with me now, we'll get on down to the briefing room. For what it's worth, I have no intention of forcing your decision either way. It's entirely up to the pair of you to accept or turn it down."

When they entered the briefing room, Jim immediately understood Simon's reticence. Growling deep in his throat and pulling Blair even closer to him, he took in the group already assembled. Frown deepening even further as he sensed his Guide's unhappy anxiety, he looked first over at SAC Matthews from the FBI and Captain Sullivan from Vice. Also seated was Daniel Brown, the

Vice detective they had befriended and worked with previously, and two other Sentinel / Guide pairs who were the newest recruits to the Vice unit. There were several other cops in attendance, but it was the first group that looked like the major players in the investigation.

Although he and Blair had worked with Captain Sullivan on occasion, the last time Jim had worked with the FBI was at the Galbini bust when he'd gone undercover and discovered Blair. The memory brought him no satisfaction, apart from the actual finding and rescuing of his Guide, and he instinctively knew he wasn't going to like what they had to say.

Beside him, Blair swallowed loudly and his eyes took on a wide and frightened look, although he stood his ground even if leaning a little more heavily than usual into Jim's comforting bulk.

Daniel smiled and rose to his feet, holding out his hand unthreateningly. Jim realised he was trying to defuse the situation before matters got out of control, so, taking a deep and steadying breath, Jim shook the proffered hand briefly before moving aside to let Blair follow suit. Greetings over, he quirked an eyebrow questioningly at Blair and jerked his chin towards the empty chairs awaiting them. Receiving a tiny nod of assent from his nervous Guide, they took their seats, and prepared to listen.

Visibly relieved for the time being at least, Special Agent in Charge Matthews coughed pointedly to attract his audience's attention, then opened the file in front of him.

"Sentinel Detective Ellison, Guide Sandburg, thank you for coming to this briefing. I am well aware that you may not like what I have to say, but I would ask you to hear the whole story before making a judgement based on gut reaction.

"Some of what I'm about to outline you'll already be aware of, but there have been several changes to the situation which are more recent and which affect the whole scheme, so, with your permission, everyone, I'll run through the complete plan.

"As you all know, a significant member of the underworld managed to avoid arrest during the Galbini bust, due to being tipped off by crooked cops, who have since been dealt with." Here, he had the grace to look away from Blair, who had gasped in shock at the mention of his nemesis, and the barely veiled reference to the imprisonment of Eric Mancuso and the accidental death of his partner Barney Davidson at Blair's hands.

Instantly reacting to his Guide's unhappiness, Jim growled again and glared at the agent. "It this going anywhere soon, or are we just rehashing bad memories here?" he snarled.

Holding up his hands in denial, Matthews replied quickly, "I'm sorry to cause you any upset, Guide Sandburg, but the background information is necessary for the newer officers here. It is not meant to reopen old wounds for the sake of it."

Swallowing hard again, Blair spoke in a tiny voice. "It's OK, Agent Matthews. Just caught me unawares, is all. I'm sorry..."

"Not at all, Guide Sandburg. Quite understandable. Now, to continue..." he said, looking round at the assembly, "the crime lord that slipped through the net was Kobyoshi, the Seattle player. For a few months after the bust, he went to ground, no doubt waiting his chance to pick up where Galbini left off. However, because of information received, particularly from Guide Sandburg here, the inside informants were arrested so the pickings were noticeably less than they should have been.

"Since then he has been under close surveillance, and we understand he's getting ready to make his play for Cascade's crime scene, particularly drugs and heavy-duty prostitution – kinky clubs, BDSM, that sort of thing. He's moving slowly, trying not to be too obvious, just taking over a bit at a time, using a little bribery and intimidation where appropriate. He certainly has one or two councilmen in his palm already. There is a possibility that he may even have been behind the 'Sons of Satan' biker gang drive-by shooting case that Detectives Ellison and Brown were instrumental in closing – along with Guide Sandburg's help," he added, smiling ingratiatingly at Jim and Blair.

"Anyway," he continued, "we want to use this possibility to our advantage in the operation we have in mind.

"Basically, the plan is to set up Detective Brown as a wannabe club manager and racketeer wanting to get in on some real action. As he is still relatively new to the PD, unlike Jim here, who would undoubtedly be 'made' pretty quickly due to the high profile media coverage he's been on the receiving end of recently, Daniel's the best choice for the role.

"The idea is to spruce up the 'Blue Lagoon' a bit, now that Schiffer is dead, and reopen it still as a strip joint, but also as a front for a heavy-duty BDSM type of Members Only club in back. Seeing as Kobyoshi is known for his kinks, he might fall for it, especially if there is an additional incentive which will tempt him to come to the negotiations in person."

Here he began to look distinctly less composed, especially in the face of the growing animosity from Jim in response to the rising distress from his Guide.

Everyone in the room shifted uncomfortably in their seats, as, whether in possession of sentinel senses or not, they were aware of the emotional undercurrents swirling about the Alpha pair.

Voice shaking with barely controlled terror, but speaking out determinedly nonetheless, Blair murmured, "What exactly is it you need me to do, sir? I know you're leading up to something, some role you want me to play. Please just tell me." And he looked up into Matthews' face; eyes huge and fear-filled, while Jim held him close, growling in rising fury.

Matthews coughed and looked askance at the irate Sentinel, before continuing in an almost apologetic tone. "Guide Sandburg, Blair, what we propose is for you to be used as a sweetener for the deal – a bait, if you will--"

At that point Jim erupted, barely prevented from ripping the man's throat out by the restraining power of his Guide's firm grip on his sleeve. "NO! NO WAY!" he roared, only to be silenced by Blair's plea.

"Please, Jim, let's just hear the man out. I have to know...."

Subsiding with extremely bad grace, Jim growled, "OK, if you have to, Chief, but I'm not liking this one bit!"

"And you think I do?" came the quiet reply, with a brave attempt at humour. "Please carry on, Agent Matthews."

"Well, we already know that Kobyoshi has certain 'tastes', and we have also found out that he was particularly smitten by you, Guide Sandburg, while he was visiting Galbini." Continuing doggedly despite his awareness of both Blair's visible distress and his Sentinel's mounting fury, he said, "The idea is for Detective Brown, in his guise as club manager, to take you along to the meeting with Kobyoshi, which is planned to take place at one of his tame councilmen's houses. He will say he has recaptured you, and that he's willing to part with you to Kobyoshi if he'll make the deal--"

Again, Jim erupted. "NO! I'm not saying it again! How the HELL can you even ask it of him? Have you any IDEA what those animals did to him? What they KEPT doing? You're out of your MINDS if you think he'll go back under in that role!"

"Jim! JIM! Please man, please calm down. Please don't make this harder than it already is!" Blair was almost in tears trying to restrain his furious Sentinel, who was going into full protector mode, while the other pairs, reacting to their Alpha's distress, were growling in their turn and glaring daggers at the bemused and plainly anxious Agent.

Matthews, who deserved full marks for perseverance in the face of such potential danger, said firmly, "If you'll just hear the rest of the plan, Sentinel Ellison? The idea is hardly to send Guide Sandburg in unprotected. Not only will he have Detective Brown with him, but we want to utilise the available Sentinel / Guide pairs to monitor the situation closely so that as soon as we have damning evidence of the deal, the bust will go down. Of course, we understand that you will need to be close by--"

"Well, that's just fine and dandy," snarled Jim. "But what if Kobyoshi wants to play with his new toy for a bit before settling down to the talking part? How will Daniel deal with that?"

"I understand your concern, Sentinel Ellison, and I assure you that at the first hint that Guide Sandburg may be in danger of abuse, the arrest will go down whatever."

Blair, almost curled up in his seat with anxiety, nevertheless had the presence of mind to 'read' the Agent, and found that the man was actually sincere, even if he couldn't realistically follow through on his assertions.

In a tiny voice that had everyone present but the sentinels straining to hear his words, he whispered, "OK, I'll do it. Please Jim, I have to! Please don't be mad at me. Please don't make me feel worse than I already do!" and he buried his face in Jim's sleeve, praying for all he was worth that he hadn't irrevocably damaged their partnership.

Unable to voice his complete and utter disapproval because he was so angry, and struggling not to shake his brave but oh, so foolish Guide until his teeth rattled, Jim sat stiffly, not even able to offer Blair the comfort of their link because his uncontrolled fury would undoubtedly have set the young man off into a panic attack or something similar.

Seething, he listened as the rest of the details were outlined, trying hard not to throw up at the thought of his beloved Blair dressed once again in the awful bondage gear, and resuming his submissive slave persona.

The briefing broke up shortly after, with the participants agreeing to thrash out the final details over the next couple of days, with the actual meeting set up for three days' time.

Jim had resolutely refrained from speaking to Blair, or connecting with him because he was so mad and wrapped up in his fear for and anger at his Guide.

For his part, Blair withdrew into himself, convinced he had had no choice but to offer his services in bringing down a perverted slimeball like Kobayoshi, but desperately afraid of the repercussions for their partnership.

The drive home was silent, but not in any companionable sense. Blair curled up in the passenger seat with his arms around his knees, staring out of the side window with silent tears streaking down his face. Although he was undoubtedly unaware of the picture he presented, Jim thought he looked about ten, and as if he'd just lost his puppy.

As for Jim himself, he felt torn in several directions, not knowing yet how he truly felt about Blair's stance in the briefing room. He did know, however, that he ought to be praising the young man for his bravery in volunteering even though he was actually furious that Blair's possible self-sacrifice might be to the detriment of their bond.

When they pulled up outside of 852, Jim made to open the driver's door when Blair, almost destroyed by guilt and fear, tentatively reached out a hand to touch Jim's thigh. In that moment, Jim knew he couldn't keep up his stone-faced façade, and murmuring, "Oh, baby," held out his arms to receive a bundle of sobbing, desperate Guide.

"Please don't hate me Jim. I love you so much. Please say you still love me, please! I can't live without you. If you don't want me to do it I won't, I promise. Just please don't hate me...."

Some minutes later, when Blair had quieted a little, Jim shifted in his seat and pushed the smaller man away slightly to peer into the distraught face.

"Let's take this indoors, baby. We'll talk some more then, OK? And, for the record, I could never hate you, Chief. Get mad at you, sure, but hate, never!"

Nodding and sniffing, Blair gazed at him with wide, red-rimmed eyes, and allowed himself to be lifted out of the truck by strong and caring arms.

Once back inside the loft, they were both too worn out with the emotions of the afternoon to do more than grab a salad for dinner, and head for the shower. Once there, Blair was desperate to love his Sentinel, sinking to his knees almost immediately, so that Jim felt compelled to pull him back to his feet.

"No, baby, not like that – never like that for us. You have nothing to prove to me about your love. I don't need a guilt-based blow job, however good it would be."

Thoroughly mortified, and not knowing how to handle his despair, Blair moaned in distress. "I'm sorry, Jim. Truly, I can't seem to do anything right...."

"S'OK, love, stop that right now. You've done nothing wrong. You just acted as your conscience dictated at the briefing, and you're just trying to do your best for me. Just stop trying so hard, baby. It's not your fault, and you shouldn't blame yourself. Now, let's just finish up here and get to bed. I think the best thing for us now is to bond, however you want to do it, and then get some sleep."

Nodding in agreement, but still hanging his head in embarrassment, Blair quickly and efficiently washed Jim down, keeping his touch light and non-arousing, as Jim did for him.

Climbing into their large bed, Blair moved in to cuddle up as soon as he saw Jim's smile of encouragement. Holding each other tightly for a while, and basking in the comfort of the reopened link, they gradually felt their tensions ease and their touch moved from simple comfort to intimacy.

"Please make love to me, Jim?" whispered Blair, needing the comfort and support of the full bond.

"Sure, baby, anything you want," murmured Jim, inordinately pleased that their connection remained strong and undamaged despite the disagreement. Smiling gently, he stroked the smaller body with love and caring, allowing the touch to become more intimate as Blair relaxed into the mood, until they were both fully aroused and needy.

When Jim lifted the young Guide up into his lap in their chosen position, Blair sighed contentedly as he lowered himself onto Jim's large and ready cock, to ride him to their mutual release and the healing glow of the bond.

The following morning, they both woke early after passing a restless night during which Blair was troubled with nightmares several times and had to be soothed back to sleep by Jim's gentle touches.

Propped up on one elbow and peering into his Guide's still tired face, where dark shadows were beginning to form beneath the rather red-rimmed eyes, Jim stroked a slightly whiskered cheek with soft movements.

"You had some pretty good nightmares there, baby. Do you want to tell me what they were about? It might help to get them out into the open."

Lowering his eyes, Blair sighed deeply and whispered, "I know I'll probably feel better afterwards, but, if I tell you, can you promise me that we don't have to talk about it anymore? I really just want to forget."

"Sure, baby. I only want to make you feel better, not drag out the misery by talking it to death."

Pulling the smaller body into his arms, he positioned Blair's head on his shoulder, knowing that his Guide would be more comfortable opening up if he didn't have to look directly at Jim.

Sighing deeply again, Blair began slowly.

"When I told you that I was drugged a lot of the time before being given to Galbini's 'guests' to play with, I don't know if I told you how sometimes the effects would wear off before they were done with me? It didn't happen often, really, which is better for me in a way, as the 'roofies' made me both more cooperative and less likely to remember anything after.

"Anyway, I've noticed lately that occasionally I get flashes of memories – just brief glimpses really – of things that went on while I was still under the influence, so to speak. Most of the time it's so quick I just suck it up and try to push it out of my mind, but last night it was different. I think because of the briefing, and because it's in the forefront of my mind, I had much longer and more detailed memories of that time with Kobayashi and his henchmen. It was so much worse than I thought..." and he tailed off into silence, as a few tears began to leak out from beneath his closed eyelids.

Wanting to comfort, but also wanting to hear what his lover had to say so he could get it off his chest and move on, Jim simply whispered soothing nonsense words while cuddling the trembling body to him.

After a moment or two, Blair restarted his tale of woe.

"I'll understand if you don't want to hear this, Jim, and I won't go into detail anyway, but just stop me if you've heard enough, OK?"

"Don't worry about me, Chief. I just want you to relate as much as you want so you can get it out in the open and then kick it into touch."

Nodding against Jim's shoulder, Blair continued.

"I remember now that it wasn't just Kobyoshi and his two main men who 'played' with me that night. Mancuso and Davidson were there as well, for the whole time, not just afterwards when I overheard their conversation with Kobyoshi when they tipped him off about the raid on Galbini. I guess I should have recalled it after hearing what they taunted me with when they attacked me in the restroom. They did awful things to me, Jim. They took me over and over again and hurt me, especially Kobyoshi. I know that when I woke properly, Galbini's tame doctor was patching me up, and I hurt much more than usual after one of those sessions. That was mostly Kobyoshi's doing. He really got off on hurting me, Jim...."

This time, Blair couldn't speak any more for the sobs that overtook him, so Jim just held him tightly until the storm passed, trying desperately to keep his anger to himself so as not to upset his Guide any more than he was already.

When the wracking sobs had diminished to snuffles and Blair had wiped his face and nose with the tissues Jim had reached over to get for him from the box on the nightstand, he raised his head from the comfortable anonymity of Jim's shoulder to look him in the eyes, and said in a small voice, "Why did they do that to me Jim? Why? And how can you even bear to hold me after finding out?"

"Simple, Chief," came the sincere reply. "Nothing that happened to you was your fault. The blame and the shame lies entirely at their door, baby. I hate what they did to you, more than I can say, but it'll never affect how I feel about you, kiddo. We were meant to be together, and no one and nothing can change that for us. You're still beautiful, baby, inside and out, and I have an idea I'd like to put to you if you're up to it. It's just a thought, mind, so if you don't like it, just forget I said anything, OK?"

Mystified, and diverted for a while from his guilt and sorrow, Blair cocked his head questioningly, tacitly asking for Jim to continue.

Taking a breath, and maintaining 'cuddle mode', Jim looked at his Guide's lovely face and began.

"First off, love, I don't want you to take this the wrong way. It's just a whim, if you like, that occurred to me a bit back when I was admiring you in the bathroom." And here he waggled his eyebrows suggestively to lighten the moment.

"Anyway, I saw you looking at the tattoos again, and I saw the sorrow in your eyes, and I thought how much I wanted to help you. My idea may seem a bit odd, but I honestly only want to help you change the way you feel about yourself, OK?"

Even more mystified, but confident in his belief that anything Jim came up with would be with the best of intentions, Blair nodded encouragingly.

"Well, baby, I was thinking that maybe you'd want to try laser removal on the tats, but I understand it's pretty painful and can lead to scarring, which you might hate even worse than the tattoos themselves. So then I thought, how about taking ownership of them ourselves? Now, just hear me out, OK?" when Blair opened his mouth to comment.

"The idea is that we could look at them as symbols of our commitment to each other rather than as a mark of ownership by Galbini. Not that I'd ever have had you do something like that on my behalf, though! But I could have something also, a tattoo, ring, necklace, whatever you want, for my side of the deal. What do you think? You don't have to say anything right now, babe, just consider it for a bit. And if it's too weird, forget it."

Frowning in perplexity, Blair gazed at Jim, head tilted slightly to one side. 'Cute' just wasn't enough to describe what Jim thought of his expression, and he leaned forward to kiss the tip of the pert little nose.

Pulling back a little with a giggle, Blair spoke up. "Thanks Jim. It means so much to me that you've given this so much thought, just to make me feel better. Just knowing how you feel about me helps a lot, truly, man. I really think I can get behind the idea, now I know it's not such a disfigurement in your eyes as I believed. One thing though," he added quickly. "I don't need you to get anything like this, man. You're far too beautiful to mark up in any way. But I'd love to get you a pendant or something. Whatever you could live with, Jim."

"I could live with just about anything, as long as I don't have to live without you, babe!" Jim replied, smirking a bit at the rising sap, but thoroughly enjoying the mirth it brought to Blair's face.

Finally letting rip with a genuine, honest-to-goodness grin, Blair lowered his face to kiss his Sentinel with all the passion and loving he could manage, until breathlessness forced them apart.

Equally happy, and grinning in his turn, Jim said briskly, "And on that note..." before grabbing his Guide's hand to haul him bodily out of bed and into the shower in order to avoid being late in setting off to the PD.

Over the next couple of days, Jim and Blair worked hard to keep up with their own case load and paperwork in the MCU, as well as attending more meetings to thrash out the details of the proposed Kobyoshi bust. Simon, knowing that the investigation was taking a heavy toll on the pair, tried to keep the worst cases away from them, sharing them out instead amongst the other MCU detectives.

During the meetings, there was more than one argument as SAC Matthews tried to pull his plan together, mostly concerned with what could be done to reduce the risk to Blair in his vulnerable role as 'bait'.

However, disagreements aside, the plan began to come together as Daniel, in his role as sleazy entrepreneur, confirmed that he'd set up the meeting with Kobyoshi as requested, to take place at his tame councilman's palatial home on the outskirts of Cascade at noon the following day. Uncomfortably, he admitted that the deciding factor for Kobyoshi's interest and personal attendance was indeed the 'sweetener' of being given Blair for his own to play with.

Gulping with fear, but knowing that it was only what he expected, Blair tried desperately to put up a brave front for his Sentinel's sake, despite knowing that it was of face value only as Jim could easily sense his inner turmoil.

Nevertheless, he was determined to do his part, so it was left to Jim to work with the other officers and the two Sentinel / Guide pairs to find the best and most workable positions from which to monitor the meeting and back up the undercover people, who would comprise of Daniel, Blair and two other Vice cops who would be posing as Daniel's bodyguards.

Captain Sullivan had had the immediate area surrounding the councilman's house, and the house itself, checked out as thoroughly as possible, so the best places for maximum cover and minimum problems with entry were identified and allocated to the Sentinel and Guide pairs. Meanwhile, the uniforms and backup units would remain out of sight a couple of streets away from the house and grounds, ready to roll on command. Although there was a pretty good security system fitted, along with electrically operated gates and a couple of private guards, there was nothing that would cause too many problems for sentinel senses, although it was a given that the guards would be supplemented by Kobyoshi's own men during his visit.

As for Jim, Captain Sullivan and Agent Matthews knew they would have to allow him to pick his own spot from which to monitor his Guide, since it was highly unlikely that he'd accept any suggestion from a *mundane* when the safety of his partner was involved. They knew they could trust him to act responsibly as he was nothing if not highly professional; unless, of course, the whole set-up went to hell in a hand basket, in which case nothing but a bullet would stop the Sentinel going to the rescue of his Guide.

Blair, for the most part, simply sat and listened, taking in every bit of information his sponge-like brain could absorb. Not comfortable with offering advice or opinions on his own behalf, he could, and would do so when the safety of his Sentinel or the other officers was likely to be compromised.

The upside to the whole plan, if it could be said that anything was 'up' about it, was that he genuinely enjoyed working with the two new Sentinel / Guide pairs from Vice, as he had only had a little social contact with them up until now when they had exchanged a few words at the Sentinel / Guide Department.

The all-male pairing consisted of a tall but slender redheaded Sentinel in his early thirties, called Mick Kavanagh. His Guide, a shorter but well-muscled blonde was called Eddy Francis,

and they were obviously completely besotted with one another. However, both were friendly and competent, having been through the Academy together in Seattle.

The second pair consisted of a female Sentinel and male Guide. Sentinel Detective Mary Kelly was an Amazon of a woman, almost six feet tall, who could probably give the tough Aussie Megan Connor a run for her money in the intimidation stakes. However, in non-threatening situations, she had a very attractive smile and friendly laugh, which made Blair feel a little less in awe of her, although he felt positively diminutive between her, Jim, and Mick Kavanagh.

Mary's Guide was about the same height as her, but slightly older; in his late thirties as opposed to Mary's twenty nine years. Again, they were obviously very close, but had a light, teasing way of bickering which hid the real depth of their attraction. After they had bonded, they started working in the PD in Washington, DC, but quite openly admitted (to Blair's quiet satisfaction) to feeling a mutual need to up sticks and transfer to Cascade.

Last but not least there was Dan Brown, of whom Blair was particularly fond, having worked with him before. It was because he trusted the gentle giant so much that he felt able to make his offer to act as bait in the sting, knowing that the man would do his level best to make sure that nothing happened to harm the young man. He knew that Jim liked and trusted the other man also, which was a comforting thought.

Finally, the day of the much-anticipated operation arrived, and Jim and Blair arrived early at the PD following a night of tender love-making and bonding intended to help and comfort both partners. Blair had finally fallen asleep tucked close to his Sentinel where he felt safe and protected; enough so that he managed to get a few hours' undisturbed rest. Jim, on the other hand, was in full-on Blessed Protector mode, his senses on high alert as if he was back in the army and about to go into action, which, he supposed wryly, was actually the case.

On arrival, the pair had entered the MCU to the usual friendly greetings, although there was a noticeable air of concern for their safety in several of the other detectives' demeanours and in the speculative and sympathetic sidelong glances sent their way.

Jim and Blair, on the other hand, were trying hard for a relaxed attitude, although it was plainly not working in Blair's case, at least. He was jittery and completely unable to sit still, forcing Jim to grab his knee at intervals to still the incessant bouncing movement. By mid-morning, Jim was almost climbing the walls in frustration at his Guide's frenetic activity, so much so that he was all for calling the whole deal off.

Finally, however, almost to their mutual relief, it was time to go down to Vice for the last meeting, after which the sting was set to go.

Blair took the gear handed to him with a visible shudder, but, expression settling into a determined, if somewhat shaky frown, he took himself off to the locker room to get changed.

Jim watched with concern, but realised that his Guide needed to do this alone for his own sake, knowing that he would hear instantly should the young man require his support.

The small figure that emerged from the locker room was totally changed from the one that entered. As if donning the awful bondage harness, skin tight leather pants and leather collar and cuffs had automatically switched on the requisite persona, Blair looked altogether smaller, younger and vulnerable; totally hopeless and submissive, so much so that Jim hurried over to take the slightly shaky figure into his arms, recalling only too well the first time he had seen his Guide-to-be in this condition.

Even the most hardened of the cops there couldn't help but feel for the young man, who was trying so hard not to give up and burst into tears.

Looking distinctly uncomfortable, SAC Matthews addressed the pair, looking particularly at Blair. "Are you sure you're OK with this, Guide Sandburg? We're all set to go if you are."

Biting his lower lip, Blair raised his head and looked directly at the man, and Jim was filled with pride at his Guide's gutsy response. Taking a deep breath Blair said firmly, "Yes, sir. I'm ready. Let's go and get him!" The effect was spoiled somewhat by a return of the shakes, but everyone there nodded in silent approval as they moved out.

An hour later, Daniel was approaching the front doors of Councilman Gerry Hart's mansion which was set in one of Cascade's most up-market suburbs. The requisitioned limo was being driven by one of the two cops posing as Daniel's bodyguards, while the other sat beside him in the front passenger seat. Daniel himself was seated in back with Blair crouched on the floor beside him, already in full submissive mode, and worryingly silent, despite Daniel's comforting grip on his bare shoulder.

On entering the mansion, they were met at the door by Councilman Hart, who, whisky glass in hand, waved them through to his plush den, taking a good look at the leashed slave boy following so quietly behind Daniel.

Dan himself was barely recognisable as the genial Detective. His clothes were chosen to give him the appearance of a somewhat low level wannabe crime lord, whose money exceeded his good taste. Gone was the amiable smile, and instead he affected a knowing sneer as he tugged his captive along behind him.

Kobyoshi was standing in front of the huge stone fireplace with his back to the newcomers, no doubt in a staged attempt to stamp his superiority and feigned nonchalance on the occasion.

However, on finally turning round, his glance barely took in Daniel, as it locked onto the bowed head of the boy who had sunk gracefully to his knees before him. Waving his hand at his goons

to take up their positions outside the closed door, he stepped forward, and grabbed a handful of the curly hair and pulled Blair's face up in order to see him properly.

"Very good. Very good indeed," he purred. "Come see this, Gerry. This is the slave I told you of. He was so good, so cooperative. You wouldn't believe what he's capable of, and for how long!" And he smirked cruelly at the boy's minute flinch.

Gerry, whose tastes mimicked his criminal associate's, moved forward to take a good look.

"You're right, K. He's every bit as beautiful as you said he'd be. If he performs as well as he looks, you're in for some fun. Just hope you're willing to share a little, though!" he finished with an evil and lascivious smile.

"We'll have a small demonstration now, I think. A little warming up with the strap should do it. He'll be only too willing to oblige us to avoid the pain, I think," he finished, moving towards a tall built-in closet next to the fireplace.

Nodding in happy agreement, Gerry looked round in consternation when Dan dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"I don't *think* so," he growled. "I need to know if this deal's going to go down before I hand him over. If I don't like it, I sure don't want him damaged, 'cos I'll need him in full working order for the next client. He's a prime piece of tail and he's worth a lot to me."

Deeply worried inside, he was damned if he was going to let these two have their way with Blair, deal or no deal, but he knew that it would be better for all concerned if he could keep the crime lord on track and steer him back to the talks.

Blair relaxed minutely when Kobyoshi, after thinking things over for a few long moments, gave in with bad grace, and waved his hand peremptorily towards the large desk at the side of the room. However, his heart was thundering so hard that he was sure everyone in the room must be able to hear it. He was also well aware that, wherever Jim was hiding, he would be able to pick it up easily, and he fervently hoped the Sentinel could control his protective urges long enough to let the deal go down before riding to the rescue.

Looking rather petulant, Gerry sat beside Kobyoshi after refilling his whisky glass, and Daniel took a seat opposite with Blair kneeling at his feet, while his two 'bodyguards' took up standing positions on either side of him.

Incredibly relieved, but completely poker faced, Daniel started the discussions by outlining his plans for the temporarily closed 'Blue Lagoon'. He described in detail the proposed reopening of a refurbished strip joint as a cover for the special club in back, where select clients could savour such tasty morsels as the beautiful boy at his feet. Nodding in approval, Kobyoshi offered his own ideas, and soon an animated in-depth discussion was in full swing. Dan knew

the crime lord had taken the bait when he started quoting the sort of financial backing he was prepared to put up, as long as the slave was given to him outright to do with as he pleased.

After another round of talking, the deal looked set to go ahead, and Daniel spoke the phrase agreed upon as the signal for the others to move in. "Well, I guess he's all yours, then!"

At that, several things happened at once. Jim, who had been almost vibrating with nervous energy during the exchange, leapt from his hiding place in the trimmed bushes beside the den's large picture window, and threw himself against the glass panes which shattered to let him through. Daniel meanwhile had reached for the hidden revolver in his ankle holster, and drew on Gerry Hart, who, having leapt to his feet in alarm was now standing perfectly still; whisky glass still clutched in his hand and looking completely poleaxed at Jim's crashing entry.

The other two cops busied themselves with overpowering and cuffing Kobyoshi, while the sounds coming from outside the den and throughout the rest of the house indicated that the other Sentinels and Guides were busy taking down the remaining security guards and Kobyoshi's goons.

With their boss already cuffed, and sirens heralding the imminent arrival of the backup units, most of Kobyoshi's lackeys decided that surrender was more sensible than a shoot out, and gave themselves up, with the exception of his two closest henchmen who chose to go down fighting. They took up defensive positions in the corridor outside the den, and laid down intense covering fire. Mary Kelly and her Guide Stewart Carlson decided not to disappoint them, and from her strategic position in the opulent hallway, she took them out with pinpoint accuracy as her Guide grounded her with a hand on her shoulder.

Jim meanwhile, automatically checking that everything was going down according to plan, simply took Blair into his arms and hugged him tight.

"Honey, I'm so proud of you!" he murmured into a be-ringed ear. "Are you OK? I nearly lost it when he started talking about whipping you, baby. If he'd as much as touched you with that thing, I'd have taken him out, I swear. I had a real good shot from out there, and I wouldn't have missed!"

Holding tightly to Jim's shirt wherever he could grab a good handful beneath the Kevlar, Blair gave himself up into his Sentinel's care, and let himself go, shaking wildly and gasping in panicked breaths until he could get a grip on himself.

By the time the rest of the crooks were in custody, and were being pushed into the units to be taken down town, he was back in some sort of control, and could look his Sentinel and the other cops in the face.

Although visibly shaken, there was also an underlying pride in his demeanour, as if he finally believed that he'd done OK, and had made a positive contribution to the success of the bust. With a slightly trembling smile, he was able to respond to the many concerned queries about

his wellbeing, and, stripping off the offensive harness, collar and cuffs, he shrugged into the warm jacket Jim had brought along for him.

Driving back to the PD in the limo, along with Daniel and the Vice cop who had acted as chauffeur before, Jim and Blair huddled together in the plush back seat, with Blair almost on his Sentinel's lap, absorbing all the offered comfort and doing his best to convince his partner that he really was OK – well, pretty much – through their shared link, as he didn't feel up to talking right then.

Daniel merely smiled indulgently at the pair, knowing that they were totally absorbed in one another, and wishing somewhat ruefully that his own empathic skills had been higher so he could have qualified as a Guide and found his own Sentinel.

Even the cop driving, who was trying to ignore the pair in back, wasn't doing it through a sense of disgust, but just to allow them a bit of privacy.

On arrival at the PD, the first thing Blair needed to do was to visit the locker room for a quick wash up and to change back into his normal clothing. Jim, understanding how much the awful gear and tight pants offended his Guide, bundled them all up to return to the Vice unit to dispose of.

Emerging from the shower, damp curls beginning to fluff out around his face, Blair still looked pale and a little shaky, but there was a bit more purpose in his stride, as if his self esteem had received an injection of confidence; a sense of satisfaction in a job well done.

Hurrying straight into Jim's waiting arms, he said warmly, "Thank you for backing me up, man. It means so much to me that you let me do this, even if it frightened the shit out of me! I just wanted to do my bit in taking that sleazeball down, Jim. He's hurt so many others just like me. I couldn't let him carry on unhindered."

Nuzzling at his Guide's neck, and breathing in the pure sweet scent of clean Blair, Jim replied, "I know, honey. I can feel your sincerity, and I do understand, but I'm praying that you don't feel the urge to offer yourself for that sort of undercover work again, because I swear I've aged ten years over these last few days."

Pulling back a little to look into his Sentinel's face, Blair gazed at him with a chagrined expression and whispered, "I'm so sorry Jim. I really didn't mean for you to get so upset. I know you love me – you show me every day how much – but it's just hard for me to understand sometimes what effect I have on you, because no one's ever thought that much of me before. I'm just not used to it. I'll try to be more thoughtful in future, I promise."

"Hey, it's all right, baby. I know you only do these things for the best of reasons. It's unfair of me to place a burden of guilt on you also. Just try to remember that what hurts you, hurts me too, OK?"

And with that, Jim tucked the smaller body into his side and they walked together in harmony to the debriefing.

It was late in the evening before the debrief wound up, leaving everyone who had taken part with a sense of grim satisfaction. Sure, Councilman Hart had been released on very highly-priced bail almost as soon as his expensive lawyer could sign the paperwork, but he wouldn't be going anywhere soon, and a conviction of some sort looked in the bag.

As for Kobyoshi and his goons, there was no way bail would be set with his reputation and the damning evidence against him, and the DA was rubbing his hands in glee at the thought of prosecuting the sleazy mobster at last.

Finally, drooping with fatigue, Jim and Blair headed for home to more or less collapse into bed, not even bothering to fix a meal to supplement the break room sandwiches they had grabbed during the evening.

Carefully undressing the most precious person in the world for him, Jim stripped his Guide down to his underwear, and pushed him gently down into the soft bed where Blair was asleep almost as his head hit the pillow.

Smiling tenderly and thanking his lucky stars that everything had worked to plan today, and that his beloved Guide remained unharmed, Jim quickly stripped down himself and slid in next to the warm body, which he spooned up behind, wrapping his arm protectively round the slumbering Guide's waist.

The following morning, Jim wakened to rare Spring sunshine playing across his face from the skylight above, and he turned his head to smile softly down at the sight before him.

Blair had turned over during the night to crawl almost halfway on top of the larger body, one arm across Jim's chest, and a leg thrown over his thighs. His head rested on Jim's shoulder, curls drifting up to tickle Jim's nose when he bent his head to drop a kiss on the young man's crown.

Warm and soft from sleep, the drowsy face peeked up at him, eyes slightly crossed as he tried to focus on his Sentinel's face, and Jim knew he would never grow weary of seeing that adorable expression, or of holding the pliant, willing body in his arms.

"Hey, baby. Sleep well?" he murmured, raising his free hand to push some of the tangled curls away from Blair's brow.

"Hmmm..mmm," was the less than articulate response, as Blair fought to get his mouth into sync with his sluggish thought processes.

Giving up on the idea, he lowered his head back down to its pillow on Jim's broad chest, fully intending to sink back into welcoming sleep, only to be rolled over in Jim's strong arms to lie fully on top of the muscular body.

"Nuh uh," said Jim, chuckling enough to make the smaller body bounce up and down on his chest. "I don't think so, Chief. We've got work to go to. Up and at 'em, baby!" and with that he proceeded to find a couple of Blair's ticklish spots and ran sentinel-sensitive fingers up and down his ribcage.

Blair shrieked indignantly, and tried valiantly to escape the wickedly teasing fingers, but it wasn't going to happen, and he succumbed to hysterical giggles until Jim took pity on him, and planted a sloppy kiss on the pink cheek nearest to him, avoiding the tempting mouth for now since it was engaged in trying to draw in gasping breaths as Blair struggled for composure.

"Rat bastard!" Blair gasped, when he finally got his breath back, but the harsh words were alleviated by the wide and adoring grin plastered across his face.

"I'd have thought we were entitled to at least a small lie-in this morning," he continued, grumbling good-naturedly.

"As it happens, Chief, you've already had that lie-in," countered his partner with a laugh. "It's almost 8.00 am. We've got less than half an hour to get ready and get down to the PD, so I suggest you stop complaining and join me in the shower," he finished with a suggestive leer and wickedly waggling eyebrow.

Breaking into fresh chuckles, Blair slid off his comfortable 'mattress' and stood beside the bed, holding out his hand for Jim to take before going downstairs to the bathroom together for a quick but most satisfying shower.

With barely time for a snatched bagel and coffee, they headed back to the PD, and entered the MCU to a hero's welcome.

Blair blushed with pleased embarrassment as he was hugged by Megan and Joel in turn, and underwent several back-slapping congratulatory encounters with some of the other detectives, as word had gotten around fast about the outcome of the bust.

"Hey Hairboy!" called out H loudly, causing Blair to jump a little. "So you didn't have to use your 'power' mojo this time, then?"

Ducking his head a little, Blair replied, "No, not this time, although it was hard not to. I knew that I had to wait as long as possible so Kobayashi could incriminate himself doing the deal with Dan, and besides, I knew Jim had it covered!" he finished with an adoring glance up at the Sentinel in question.

"OK, enough of the mush!" laughed Rafe, with a friendly slap on Blair's shoulder before returning to his desk.

Jim also received his share of praise, and was taken a little aback to even get a peck on the cheek from Megan, who grinned unrepentantly at him.

"That's for keeping my favourite anthropologist safe!" she declared. "And for you too, of course!" she added with a cheeky wink.

After a few more minutes of Jim and Blair exchanging pleasantries with the MC gang, Simon finally broke it up, barking, "OK, people, back to work. And you two," indicating Jim and Blair, "my office, now!"

Smiling, the pair headed to the Captain's office, Jim's hand as usual on the small of Blair's back, where they were invited to sit. Simon even offered them a cup of his special coffee from his personal stash, which was gratefully received.

Settling at his desk, he looked at them both with a scowl which belied his words, as he said, "I've just had the update from Sullivan, and the arraignment will be in front of Judge Doyle this morning. There's no way she's going to grant bail to Kobayashi, the way she feels about the victimisation of prostitutes and club 'performers', not to mention white slavery! He'll be in custody until trial, and I think with the evidence against him for this bust alone he'll be looking at serious jail time. I'm proud of you both," he added with another scowl, just in case they should be foolish enough to believe that he really cared.

"Now, I think it's time you got some real work done, so I've put another couple of case files on your desk. Why are you still here?" he added, standing up to usher them out of the office, this time not bothering to hide his knowing smirk.

"Sure, Simon," "Yes, Captain, sir," they responded almost simultaneously, and grinning at each other they returned to their shared desk to start looking over their new cases.

May: Jim:

Putting down the case notes he had been scanning, Jim rotated his shoulders to ease the stiffness too much desk work gave him, and glanced up at the clock on the bullpen wall. Smiling to himself, he noted that it was almost midday, and nearly time to collect his Guide from Rainier, where he had spent the morning doing a few last-minute jobs for Eli, who would be leaving for Borneo at the end of the month.

Jim knew that Blair secretly wished to accompany his mentor on a trip which would be an anthropologist's dream, but the young man kept his thoughts to himself, not wishing to upset his partner. However, Jim knew him well enough by now to understand that Blair would never actually go anywhere like that without him, and was honestly not resentful in the least for the missed opportunity.

Jim was actually rather pleased that it wouldn't be too long before he no longer had to collect his Guide from the U, as Blair's birthday was fast approaching, and the little Ford convertible would soon solve the young man's transport problems. Not that Jim minded collecting his Guide, but he felt that Blair needed a little independence, and besides, he couldn't wait to see the expression on his lover's face when he got to see his birthday present.

Continuing with that train of thought, Jim smugly congratulated himself on how the arrangements for the surprise party were coming along.

Although it had been really hard for him to keep his thoughts to himself, particularly as their shared link made secrecy well-nigh impossible, he had managed somehow to shield the plans from Blair's 'view', although the empath had to know that there was something brewing. Luckily for Jim though, Blair never pushed or questioned him over things that he felt were none of his business, accepting that Jim would 'fess up in his own good time.

On the day itself, which happened to fall on a Sunday, Jim had arranged with Megan, Joel and the rest of the MC gang that he would take Blair out for a celebratory 'brunch' at the seafood restaurant on the pier that Blair was so fond of, followed by a long walk - weather permitting, of course. Hopefully this would give the gang time to get into the loft and set out the food for the birthday buffet, after which they would call Jim on his cell phone to give him the heads up that it was safe to come back.

Meanwhile Eli and Blair's friends and acquaintances from the U should have arrived, and all should be ready to treat Blair to a well-deserved celebration.

Jim's smile broadened as he anticipated his Guide's reactions to his main presents: the car from Jim, and a state-of-the-art laptop, to which purchase the whole bullpen had contributed, along with his friends from other departments. It was well known that Blair was having increasing difficulty in trying to maintain his elderly model, which was getting more and more unreliable, even though he never complained.

Megan broke into his thoughts then, poking him sharply in the ribs and saying, "Penny for them, Ellison! Isn't it time you were on your way to collect Sandy?"

In too good a mood to snap back at her, as he frequently felt like doing, he replied instead, "I'll have you know that they're worth way more than that, Connor, and I'm about to call Blair - in fact, in one minute and fourteen seconds!"

Grinning at her raised eyebrows and wry look, he picked up the phone and started to dial, self-satisfied smirk firmly in place.

Five minutes later he was on his way down to the parking garage, accompanied by Joel, who was on his way to the nearby deli to grab a sandwich for him and Megan so they could carry on working through lunchtime on a particularly awkward case file.

"How's the rest of the arrangements going, Jim?" queried the kind older man, who had developed a real soft spot for Blair, and was truly looking forward to being able to help with the party preparations, particularly as his wife Ellen had made a beautiful cake for the occasion.

"OK so far, Joel," replied Jim. "Eli and Blair's other university friends have promised not to let anything slip to our boy about Sunday, and so far I haven't heard anything said accidentally in the bullpen in Blair's hearing, so I think the surprise element should be total! If you can park the car just out of sight of the front of 852, I'm certain that Blair won't have a clue as to what we've got for him. He's going to be really pleased, Joel, but don't be surprised if he gets a little emotional though. He's so unused to having people do things for him even now. Just goes to show what kind of upbringing he had, huh?"

"Yeah, you're right," agreed Joel, shaking his head a little sadly. "I find it hard to believe that anyone could not love that boy on sight, you know! What's not to like?"

"I know, Joel, but you have to have seen Naomi to believe it, and I only had the pleasure of her company for less than an hour! What with that, and the information I've managed to draw out of him since, I can well believe that he's never had anyone or anything to really call his own all his life. It's almost as if, once conceived, he became an optional extension to his Mom's life-style to pick up or leave as the mood took her. Perhaps I'm being overly judgemental here, but in my opinion she's really lacking in maternal instincts." Shaking his head with an exasperated sigh, he stopped when he reached the truck, and turning towards his friend he continued, "Between you and me Joel, he's probably better off never seeing her again, but I'm sure he doesn't feel the same. Ah well, best be off! See you later, Joel!" and with Joel's cheerful farewell ringing in his ears, he started the truck and set off for Rainier and Hargrove Hall.

Pulling up outside the hall a short time later, Jim climbed down from the cab to receive an armful of Blair, who launched himself into his Sentinel's arms with his customary enthusiasm. Leaning down to plant a quick kiss on the smiling succulent lips, he smiled down at the happy face, and felt his mood automatically lighten in the presence of such genuine devotion.

"Good day at the office, Chief?" he asked with a grin. Pulling away to whap Jim playfully on the arm, Blair giggled infectiously before answering, "Probably better than yours, big guy. I've finally secured the last of the supplies Eli requisitioned, so he's good to go in a couple of weeks. I'll miss him so much, Jim, but I'm so pleased to have been able to help him with the organisation for this trip after all he's done for me. It isn't much of a repayment, but at least I feel less guilty about all this," he finished, waving his arm expansively to encompass the whole campus.

"You know good and well that he wouldn't expect anything more, baby. And I know very well that he's just pleased to have you back here working with him, and everything else you've done for him is just icing on the cake. He's a good man, Chief, and he loves you like a father. Now, come on, there's a case file with your name on it on my desk, and a bunch of reports to type

up, and I just *know* you're really looking forward to a vending machine lunch!" he finished sardonically.

"Vending machine!" came the expected horrified response. "Even Wonderburger is better than that...er...oops! I walked straight into that one, didn't I?" groaned his Guide with a suitably pained expression.

"Thanks for the offer, Chief, I really appreciate it!" laughed Jim, and, handing the smaller man up into the passenger seat, headed off for his favourite drive-thru, licking his lips in gleeful anticipation of a double cheeseburger with everything.

Sunday Morning: - Blair's Birthday:

It was gone 8.30 in the morning when Blair finally peeled one eye open to peer myopically at the digital alarm clock on the nightstand. Having had to go in to work for nearly the whole of Saturday – which they'd been hoping to have off – in order to help Jim with the investigation of a double homicide, he was still feeling exhausted with the sort of tiredness that hits you hard after running on too much adrenaline for too long. Reaching out and realising that Jim's side of the bed was empty, he supposed that his lover had decided to leave him to lie in for a bit longer while he got on with whatever essential chores a Sentinel deemed couldn't be left undone for a moment longer.

He smiled lazily to himself at the irreverent image of Jim polishing the silverware, and rolled over to bury his head in the pillow again, only to be assailed by thoughts of yesterday's case.

Rolling onto his back again to stare at the high ceiling, he remembered how Simon's apologetic phone call early the previous morning had roused them both out of bed, breaking up the cuddle session they'd both been thoroughly enjoying.

Banks had informed them brusquely that there had been a double slaying in one of the more up-market areas of Cascade, and since one of the victims turned out to be some distant relative of the Mayor, the case had been kicked straight up to Central PD's Major Crimes instead of the Homicide division in the precinct where it rightfully belonged. With most of his detectives already either out of the office or working on their own cases, Simon had had no option but to call in his Sentinel / Guide team to take a look at the crime scene to see what they could come up with.

After Simon had filled in such details as he was aware of, they had set out shortly after to drive to Bayside Heights, where a police tape cordoned off the access to a very pleasant two story house in a secluded cul-de-sac.

The detective already on site had greeted them somewhat stiffly, which was hardly surprising as he worked out of Bayside precinct, and he wasn't happy that the Alpha pair from Central had been called in, especially since Bayside had their own Sentinel / Guide pairs to call on.

Jim simply hadn't the time or inclination to debate the reasoning or protocol behind the allocation, and led Blair into the house without further ado.

Blair hung back slightly behind him when he felt Jim tense and take a shallow breath, having been assailed by the sickly smell of fresh blood and the other unpleasant odours associated with dead bodies. Gripping the Sentinel's arm and whispering to him to ground him, Blair paled dramatically when Jim looked down at him, face grim.

"You may not want to go in there, baby," he said, indicating the first floor bedroom just off the hallway. "I think it's going to be pretty bad."

Sure enough, the first glimpse of the blood-spattered bodies draped one on top of the other in the large bed made Blair pale even further until he was almost green, but he straightened up with touching determination and stuck to Jim like glue while his Sentinel went into action.

The lower one of the sprawled bodies was male. He was lying on his back, arms spread wide with the female partly on top of him, but also on her back as if she'd been driven backwards onto him with the force of the heavy calibre bullets which had apparently ended her life.

The male victim, according to the forensics team who were still working on the bodies, had been provisionally identified as the Mayor's nephew, James Widdowson, and the woman was his wife, Darla. Both had died from gunshot wounds – that much was fairly obvious even without an autopsy – but it was Jim's acute senses which quickly determined who, and probably why the crime was committed.

In actual fact, it proved to be an open and shut case, but still exhausting nonetheless.

Firstly, Jim, with Blair's grounding, spotted a shoe print on the hardwood floor of the hall, just in the entrance to the bedroom. The tell-tale impression was so faint as to be invisible to anything but Sentinel vision, and so had initially been overlooked. He also found a minute trace of an unknown but intrusive fibre, plus one black curly hair which had caught in the door hinge. After pointing out his findings to the crime scene techs, he left them to collect and record the trace evidence while he and Blair repaired to an adjoining room.

Questioning the middle-aged cleaning lady who had discovered the bodies, Sentinel senses detected physical reactions way in excess of even the stress of finding the bloodied bodies of her employers. Under further gentle questioning by his empathic partner she reluctantly revealed that the wife had been having an affair with their recently hired gardener-cum-chauffeur, Fernando Ruiz, who just happened to have black curly hair.

When Jim, Blair and the Bayside detective arrived at the gardener's modest bungalow a few blocks away from his ex-employers' plush residence, Ruiz caved almost immediately at the mere mention of forensic evidence. He confessed to the murders, but insisted that he hadn't in fact meant to kill Mrs Widdowson, only her husband. Not the brightest bulb in the chandelier despite his film star good looks, he had rather naively expected that the rich and glamorous widow would run away with him once her husband had been taken out of the picture. However, when Ruiz had opened fire on her helpless husband, Darla Widdowson had thrown herself in between the two and taken some of the slugs meant for James alone. At that point in his confession, Ruiz had broken down and cried, to be cuffed and led away for booking; but not before he had shown Jim where the large calibre semi-automatic pistol had been dumped haphazardly in the kitchen trash.

Jim and Blair had no doubt that, what with his freely-offered confession backed up by the available trace evidence and the murder weapon, Ruiz would be sent down for Murder One.

On the drive home, Jim had been less than complimentary about both the Mayor's demand for their inclusion in the case which could have been handled just as well by the Bayside Sentinel / Guide pairs, and the attitude of the detective who had only cooperated with them with extreme ill grace. He also bemoaned the time they should have been spending together relaxing, and Blair, laying a consoling hand on his thigh as he drove, could only agree.

Abruptly distracted from his sombre train of thought by the arrival of his Sentinel who was carrying a tray laden with fresh coffee and toast, Blair shook off his slightly depressed feelings and sat up in bed.

Setting the tray down on the nightstand, Jim slid back into bed to give his lover a passionate kiss before saying, "Happy Birthday, baby!" and, reaching over to the nightstand drawer, he lifted out a small but gaily wrapped package. Dropping the package on Blair's lap, he was a little taken aback at the emotions crossing his beloved Guide's face.

Struggling between wonderment, joy, and love, Blair gazed at the package with wide eyes, and murmured incredulously, "For me? Oh Jim! Thank you so much!"

Trying for humour to stave off the emotion threatening to erupt in tears, Jim said, "Hey baby, you haven't even seen what it is yet! It could be awful for all you know!"

"No Jim," was the immediate response. "Whatever you give me has to be good. Can I open it now?" he added, sounding about ten years old and glowing with anticipation.

"Knock yourself out, baby," replied Jim, and he sat back to watch as his excited lover carefully peeled away the wrapping paper to reveal a long, narrow jewellery case, which he opened reverently.

Inside the box lay a choker style pendant of genuine Native American origin, made up of semi-precious stones and beads strung on a leather thong and finished with a bone amulet, beautifully carved in the shape of a wolf. Blair lifted it carefully from out of its box, and after admiring it for many long moments, held it out to Jim.

"Please put it on me? It's beautiful, Jim, and I want to wear it now."

Swallowing down his own rising emotions, Jim complied, and leaning forward, closed the clasp to fasten the pendant around Blair's neck. He pulled back a little then, and took a moment to admire the effect.

The beautiful natural stones all but hid the tattoo, whilst the pendant lay in the hollow of Blair's throat, drawing the gaze naturally to the exquisite workmanship of the amulet.

"It looks great, baby, just as I'd hoped. Take a look in the mirror and see what you think," he finished, holding out a hand mirror to his Guide.

Taking the mirror, Blair gazed at his reflection for a few long moments, then said, "It's beautiful, Jim. It's totally as good as you suggested - better even - and it makes me so much more comfortable about the tattoos, man. They don't even figure with this beautiful pendant to distract people's attention. Thanks, Jim. Love you so much!"

And he fell into Jim's welcoming arms to be rocked and cuddled for long moments until they were forced apart by stomachs grumbling for sustenance, so they set to with happy grins.

Sometime later, having assuaged their hunger and set the now empty tray aside, Blair nibbled at his lower lip for a second before saying "Um, Jim? Please don't think I'm trying to downplay my present, which I'm totally not doing - it's so beautiful - but do you remember our conversation when you talked about a mutual symbol of commitment? Um, it's just that I got to thinking about that a bit back, and I had this sort of inspiration, you know? And I got this for you..." and he reached under the bed and pulled out a paper bag which he held out for Jim to take, torn between love and fear that his Sentinel may be offended by his presumption.

"I was waiting for the right time to give it to you, and I think this is it."

"Take it easy, gorgeous," said Jim with a smile. "If it's one of your inspired buys, then it's going to be great, I know. I'm just really happy that you took my suggestion seriously and in the spirit in which it was offered. Now, what is this?" and he opened the bag to reveal another pendant, this one hanging on a silver chain, and which was carved out of jade in the form of a leaping jaguar.

Totally lost for words, he simply looked up into his beautiful Guide's hopeful but anxious gaze and held out the pendant, indicating that he wanted Blair to put it on him.

Taking a deep breath, Blair took the chain, and reaching up with slightly shaking hands to fasten it around his Sentinel's bowed neck, he sat back and waited for a reaction as Jim picked up the hand mirror in his turn.

After many long moments of admiring the jewellery, Jim looked up at his beloved Guide with a happy smile plastered across his face.

"I don't know what to say, sweetheart! It's fantastic! I'll wear it always, baby, as long as you wear mine, and we'll never be parted, ever!"

And they fell into each other's embrace, and didn't resurface for quite some time.

By mid morning, however, Jim's internal Sentinel alarm was ringing urgently, so trying hard to appear nonchalant; he eased out of bed, suggesting to his Guide that they got ready to have the birthday brunch he'd booked in advance at the Sea Spray cafe on the pier. Blair, positively glowing with happy anticipation, fairly leapt out of bed to follow his lover down to the bathroom for their customary shared shower.

Shortly afterwards, they were indulging in an obscenely sumptuous breakfast buffet, while Jim surreptitiously awaited the expected message from Joel to confirm that all was ready at the loft.

Having paid the check and steered his lover out on to the pier walk, under the excuse that he needed the exercise, Jim ambled happily along, smugly basking in the soothing chatter his Guide maintained, and enjoying the mutual comfort of their close contact.

With everything going according to plan thus far, it wasn't too long until he received Joel's text message, and, distracting his inquisitive partner with well-rehearsed platitudes, they turned and made their way unhurriedly towards the truck, to drive back to the loft.

Not long afterwards they were bickering happily and walking down the hallway towards #307. Jim reached for his key to open the door, then gently urged his Guide to enter ahead of him with a light push as he stood back to wait for the anticipated reaction.

Sure enough, Blair stopped dead in his tracks at the wall of faces arrayed in front of him, and he nearly jumped out of his skin at the enthusiastic cry of, "Happy Birthday!" from the assembled crowd.

It took several moments, and a soothing touch from his Sentinel to get him back into gear, but, once he had accepted the party as a done deal, Blair launched himself into the happiness of the occasion, loving the interaction with University friends and PD friends alike. He fairly bounced between guests, lighting up with joy at every contact, and leaving satisfaction in his wake, while Jim looked on in delighted glee that his 'surprise' party seemed to be such a success.

After several hours of genial eating, drinking and generally making merry, Jim tapped his beer mug (because he didn't have a wine glass handy) and proposed a toast to his partner, who he had pulled to his side, and who was now reduced to blushing to his hairline in pleased reaction.

Everyone immediately turned to face the pair, having a good idea of what Jim wanted to say, and preparing for the occasion.

Smiling lovingly at the small figure tucked into his side, Jim began.

"First of all, I want to thank you all from both of us for coming here today. It hasn't been the easiest secret to keep, but I think we've all done pretty good in keeping the birthday boy here in the dark. I want to thank Eli here for organising the University presence – thanks guys – and our colleagues in MCU – Simon, Megan, Joel and everyone for the bullpen contribution. It hasn't been easy keeping this from our little 'super sleuth' here, but I think we did OK, and he didn't have a real clue about this – am I right, Chief?" At Blair's blushing nod, he continued.

"Anyway, we're getting to the grand finale, and I want you to know we're both of us really grateful for your kind gifts." And with this, he looked down at his totally bewildered guide, who had honestly had absolutely no idea that there was anything else to come after the sheer pleasure of his friends' attendance, and was gazing up at him with an expression closely resembling a stunned mullet.

Seeing that something had to break the temporary impasse, Simon deemed it his role to step forward, with a grinning Daryl at his side.

"Well, far be it for me to upset the apple cart, but Daryl here needs to get home to bed – I mean, to revise," – he amended hurriedly at his son's indignant glance. "But I have to say that I totally approve of the PD's gift to Blair. He is a real asset to our unit, and he deserves the best electronic capability available. So, Blair, take this and enjoy," he said, handing over a large flat package. "And make sure we get the benefit!" he added, expected scowl in place, which changed to a wolfish grin at the young man's astounded look.

Half worriedly looking to Jim for approval, Blair started to unwrap the large box, which revealed the laptop of his dreams – the highest spec available – and he simply gazed up at his cheerful audience with wide-eyed and speechless wonder.

Jim, understanding his partner's emotions at the deepest level, rescued the overwhelmed empath by saying, "I think it's pretty obvious how much he appreciates this," nudging his Guide playfully, but keeping his own emotions under tight control as the assembly erupted in a spontaneous round of applause.

Within a short space, Blair was able to get himself together enough to resume his role as party host, thanking everyone individually for their support and attendance, until the guests finally began to wander off, leaving with hugs and kisses for the 'birthday boy'. Joel, being the last to go, couldn't help but wink conspiratorially at Jim as he went, slipping a set of car keys into his hand as he shook it in farewell before escorting his wife Ellen out of the door.

With Joel and Ellen's departure, Blair faced his partner and said wonderingly, "Jeez, Jim! I have to say I'm totally in awe of your hard work at setting up this gig, but how did you have the time to

organise everything, and the great presents? I've never had *anything* like this before, ever. It's been so great!" and he threw himself into Jim's arms for a long cuddle.

Smiling in his turn, and pushing Blair away slightly so he could look down at his Guide's beaming face, Jim replied soothingly, "Kiddo, there were plenty of folks rooting for you, both inside the PD and at the U. All I had to do was coordinate the thing and sit back to enjoy the outcome!"

Throwing an arm around his lover's shoulders, he added nonchalantly, "There is something I'd like for you to see downstairs, though. I'm thinking of doing something about the truck."

Gazing at Jim in puzzlement, Blair allowed himself to be steered out of the loft, and then got completely distracted on entering the elevator by Jim's hug and passionate kisses.

As they exited 852, Jim assumed a worried frown, distracting his Guide still further as he walked past the truck.

"But I thought you said..." Blair began, by now totally confused, and turning his head to look enquiringly at the vehicle in question as Jim urged him towards a small Ford convertible parked a few yards further down.

"Hmmm," murmured Jim, affecting a thoughtful expression. "This is what I had in mind, Chief. I think the truck needs a companion, rather like I do. What do you think of this one?" and he looked back at Blair, eyebrow raised in question.

"It's great, Jim! Really fantastic!" said Blair with genuine enthusiasm. "But I thought you only liked trucks because you find this sort of car too cramped for you?"

"You really don't get it, do you, baby?" laughed Jim. "It's not for me, honey. It's for you! Happy Birthday again, Chief!"

This time Blair's expression almost seemed frozen in stupefied amazement, before the message finally registered and his face crumpled as he burst into tears, and simply turned wordlessly into Jim's waiting arms to hold on for dear life as he rode out the storm of deep emotion.

Jim, knowing that his lover's reaction was only because he had had one surprise too many to assimilate over such a short time, wasn't at all hurt by the response, and smiled gently to himself as he waited for the tears to subside.

"Hey, sweetheart, don't wear yourself out thinking too hard. I know you've had plenty of shocks today, but I hope they've all been good ones. If you feel up to it, how about taking this baby out for a short spin to take your mind off everything?"

Sniffing and wiping at his wet face with the handkerchief with which Jim had had the forethought to arm himself, Blair spoke, his voice still choked with the effects of his tears. "Oh

Jim, I just haven't got the words to say how much I love you. I love the car, but I don't deserve all this. I can never repay you for everything you've done for me. I love you so much, man!"

"I know, kiddo, I know you do, and you're wrong when you say you don't deserve stuff like this. You've earned it a hundredfold just for what you've done for me, and just for being you!"

"Now, I want to see how this performs, so here are the keys. Let's go for a drive!"

And they did.

Epilogue:

Later that night, having enjoyed a drive out through the wooded countryside, where Blair had tested the small car to his heart's content, they returned to the loft to clean up the mess left from the party, before finally settling down on the sofa in an exhausted but contented tangle of limbs.

Knowing that it wouldn't be long before the pair of them fell asleep, Jim was about to suggest that they made their way up to bed when the phone rang, making them both startle a little in surprise.

"I suppose I'd better get it," said Jim with a pained sigh. "Could be something important at this time of night, I guess." So saying, he levered himself out of the seat with a gentle pat to Blair's knee, and picked up the impatiently ringing phone before the answering machine kicked in.

"Ellison!" he said abruptly into the handset. He jerked instantly awake at the voice that answered him, turning to look at Blair, who was peering over the back of the sofa at him, eyes round with worry.

"Naomi! What do you want?" Jim said, rather ungraciously. "Sure, he's right here," and he held the phone out to Blair, who had moved to his side, unconsciously seeking the comfort of contact with his Sentinel.

Worrying his lower lip in nervous anticipation, he took the phone and whispered, "Mom? Is it really you? Are you OK? What's happened?"

At the other end of the line, Naomi drew a deep breath as she easily discerned the consternation in her son's voice.

"Yes, it's me sweetie. There's nothing wrong, baby, not now. I'm just ringing you to wish you a happy birthday, and to apologise for leaving it so long to get in touch with you. I've been on a retreat as you know, and I've had plenty of time to process everything, and I realise now how my overreaction must have hurt you. I'm so very sorry, sweetie, and I hope you can forgive me."

Blair swallowed hard before replying, then said a little shakily, "Oh Mom, It's so good to hear from you. I've missed you so much. I thought you hated me for bonding, and falling in love with a cop, and the kidnapping and, and, just everything!"

"I know, sweetie, and I'm so sorry. I did think I hated the whole situation for a time, and it's taken me a lot of meditation to see how wrong I was. But I've never hated you, baby, and I just hope you can forgive me, and we can meet up soon so you can introduce me properly to your Sentinel."

"Oh Mom, there's nothing I'd like more. I do forgive you, and I'd so like for you to get to know Jim. He means everything to me, and it would mean so much to me if you could get to like each other."

"Then that's what I'll try to do, darling," came the warm reply. "I have to go now, because I'm limited with phone time here, but I'll speak to you again soon, sweetie, I promise, and we'll get together. Take care, darling, and give my regards to your Detective. Love you!"

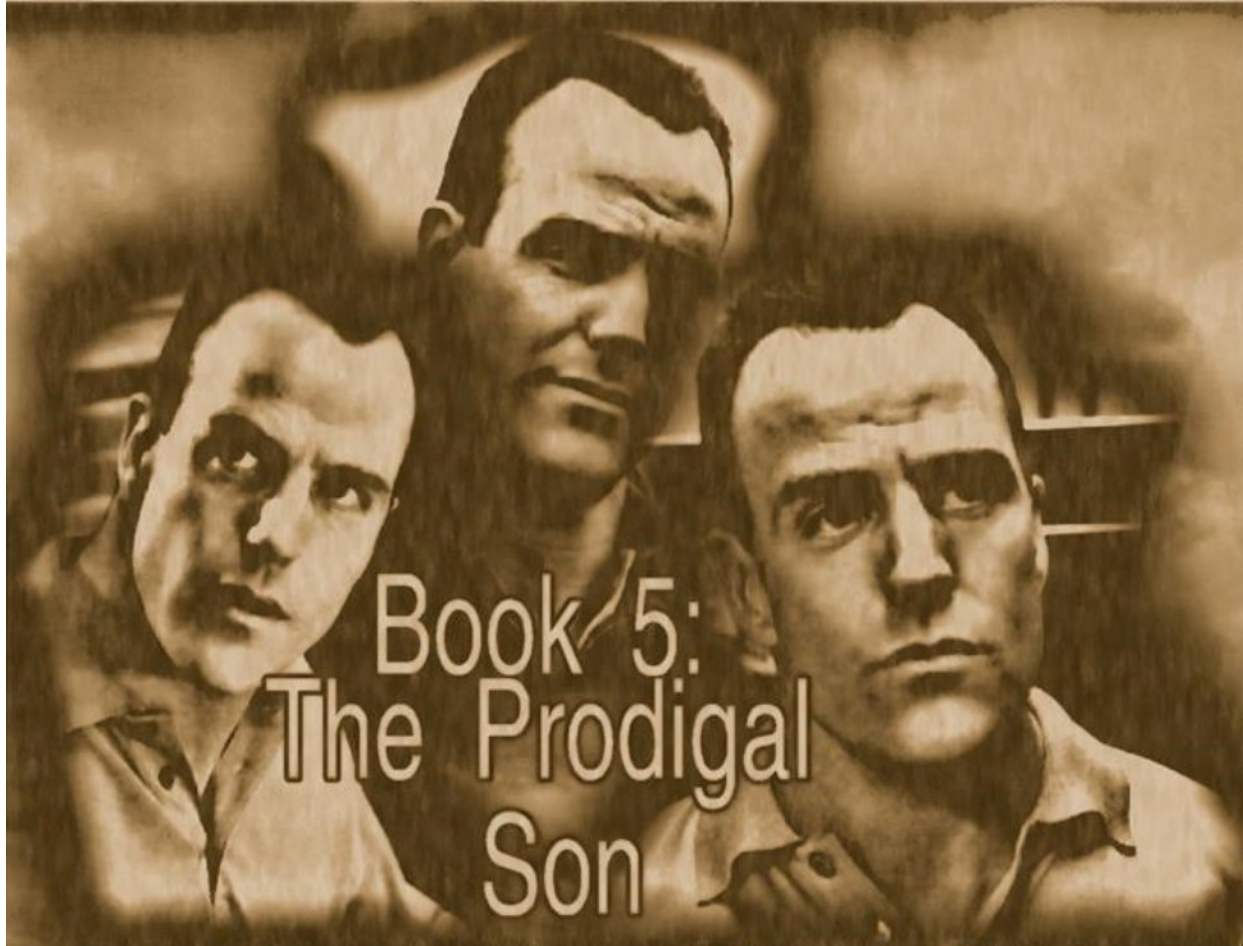
"Love you back, Mom, see you soon! Goodbye!" and Blair put the phone down.

He stared at it for a few moments while his thoughts whirled around in his overwrought mind, before turning to Jim. Knowing that the Sentinel would have listened in to both sides of the conversation simply to be ready to offer his support and comfort should the need arise; he began to speak, his face alight in wonderment.

"Oh man, I can't believe it! She remembered my birthday, and she doesn't hate me after all! It's so amazing, Jim. It really has been the most perfect birthday ever!"

And he moved into Jim's arms to soak up the loving protection he knew he would always find there.

Stroking the curly head resting on his shoulder with a gentle touch, Jim sent waves of soothing comfort and love through their link, to have similar emotions reflected back to him by his beloved Guide. Firmly ignoring the small voice inside him that cynically doubted the sincerity of Naomi's claims, he concentrated instead on the uplifting effect she had had on the young man in his arms, and for that he would always be grateful.



The Prodigal Son

William Ellison put the phone down and rubbed his eyes tiredly. Sitting in his home office, he was feeling his age, having dealt with yet another query from a Financial Director who should know better than to disturb his CEO at home.

It wasn't a crisis *per se*, and nothing that would cause him any particular problem. In fact, even up until fairly recently, he would have enjoyed the challenge, and the rush that being involved in big business usually gave him, especially if it involved imposing his will on a board member who should be more confident in his own abilities.

Today, however, he found that he was beginning to feel his age, and was looking to step back a little from the 'front line' so to speak. Except that he wasn't comfortable with leaving his beloved Ellison Enterprises in the hands of a board of directors under the leadership of his younger son, Steven. Yes, Steven was a capable enough businessman, who had willingly tried to absorb all the information and attitude his father had impressed on him, but he didn't have the killer business instincts of the elder Ellison, and would likely never expand the company to the extent that William still desired.

Granted, Steven had complied with his father's wishes by finding a suitable, wealthy and personable wife, with whom he had fathered a son and daughter in record time, but William didn't want to have to wait to see if his Grandson would be a potential 'super entrepreneur' in his own image, while he still had an older son who, if he could be persuaded to return to the fold, would definitely have the single-minded drive to forward the company's plans.

The problem with this scenario, however, as far as William was concerned, was not so much that Jimmy possessed the hyper senses of an Alpha sentinel, which could very likely be an advantage in the cut-throat world of big business and the boardroom, but that the man had rejected his father and his father's company years ago. Not only that, but when he had finally succumbed to taking a Guide, he had landed up with possibly the worst match Fate could come up with - in William's view.

Not being one to give up easily, William determined to set events in motion to win back his older son to the fold, firstly by disposing of the unwanted little hippy bastard he had taken up with, then introducing Jim to socially acceptable Guides with whom he could be taken seriously in the higher circles in which William was accustomed to move.

Unfortunately for William, his plans were flawed from the outset, because like many *mundanes*, and particularly unimaginative ones like himself, it was beyond his comprehension that a full bond, such as that shared by Jimmy and his Guide, Blair, had nothing to do with social standing, age or even gender. It was an instinctive mutual imprinting of two souls destined for each other.

For now, and comfortable with his misconceptions, William sat back and pondered the plans he had already put into place to wean his son away from the unsuitable influence of his chosen Guide.

Although he hadn't actually made any further attempt at contacting Jimmy after the disastrous confrontation at Thanksgiving, William had made it his business to keep a careful eye on his son and Blair's progress, and had been interested to find that the little bastard had friends in the teaching staff at Rainier University -; Dr Eli Stoddard, no less -; who had facilitated the boy's return to academia.

However, he was pleased to note that Dr Stoddard was now out of the country, conducting an extended expedition to Borneo, so for the moment was out of the picture.

On the other hand, as a prominent businessman, William was himself an important benefactor to Rainier, having made several substantial donations over the years, to the delight of Chancellor Edwards; a woman more concerned with monetary gain for the university than with ethics or the academic status of lowly grad students and Research Assistants.

It had been remarkably easy for William to suggest to the Chancellor that it would be of immense benefit to the university, in particular in regard to a possible new sports complex, if a

certain ex sex-slave and Guide could be dismissed, preferably ignominiously. Leaving the woman almost salivating at the prospect of such a huge boost, not only to the University's facilities, but to her own reputation as an astute financial manager, William quietly set about finding a suitable means to bring about young Sandburg's downfall.

The problem was swiftly solved when his tame private detective mentioned the private tutorials Blair offered to a handful of chosen students with whom he was able to work without too much empathic stress. With a little searching, some careful persuasion, and the promise of substantial monetary reward, William's minion secured the assistance of an impecunious second year student who was in severe need of funds, and who was prepared to shelve her principles in order to get it.

All William needed to do now was to wait for the girl to spring the trap, and Jimmy's little bastard Guide would be out on his ear, possibly even looking at jail time, and certainly ripe for throwing out of his son's life.

Blair:

In his tiny store room-cum-office in the basement of Hargrove Hall, Blair was looking forward to the last tutorial of the morning, after which he had arranged to meet Jim for a late lunch, followed by an afternoon helping his Sentinel in the MCU. He smiled happily to himself, having completed a good chunk of the research he needed for his Criminology class, and also proof reading the most recent chapter of his Forensic Anthropology Master's thesis.

Although he missed Eli very much, he had to admit that he now had more free time to himself for his own studies, but was more than grateful that his mentor had insisted on continuing to pay Blair's small fee as his Research Assistant, because he wanted to be sure that his favourite student would still be at Rainier on his return from Borneo. With the upcoming long summer break, he hoped to be able to get a significant amount of his own studying covered, at the same time as being able to spend more time at the PD with Jim, a prospect which caused him to shiver in delicious anticipation.

It wasn't that he enjoyed the grisly nature of some of the cases he had helped Jim with, and he knew himself to be less than happy with confronting death in any form, but just being with his adored Sentinel was enough for him. Jim was everything to him. Rescuer, lover, protector and best friend, he knew that, without Jim, he would quite possibly not even exist, having succumbed to the excesses of his evil captor, Vittorio Galbini.

Deliberately turning his mind away from that line of thought, he tidied away a few stray papers and took out the text he knew he'd need for the upcoming tutorial.

He admitted to himself that he wasn't altogether happy to have taken on this particular student, as he already had several hand-picked, pleasant and level-headed students who were grateful for his help and advice, and were happy to supplement his small salary with a little extra pocket money.

On the other hand, this student, Melanie Turner, had come to him in a panic, convinced that she was about to fail her Anthro class, and tearfully insisting that 'just everyone' knew that Blair was her only hope.

Although the empath in him was wary about the troubled 'vibes' he could easily discern in the girl's aura, his innate gentleness and helpful nature didn't allow him to turn her away, so he took a few deep breaths to calm himself, and waited for her knock.

The actual tutorial passed relatively easily, although Blair had to admit to himself that it was unlikely to have done Melanie much good, because she appeared to be far too wrapped up in herself and her troubles to have taken in much of his teaching and advice, even though she had thanked him for his time as she left.

A while later, after finishing with his tidy up and stuffing books and papers into his backpack, he carefully packed up his state-of-the-art laptop, smiling to himself as he recalled the scarcely imaginable thrill of receiving such a wonderful gift for his birthday. It had been matched by the car Jim had bought for him, making him briefly swallow hard with emotion at the demonstration of love and support by his Sentinel and his friends at MCU. Finally ready to leave, he heard a peremptory knock on the door, followed by the immediate entry of two grim faced uniformed police officers.

"Blair Sandburg?" the first spoke up. At Blair's puzzled nod of acquiescence, he stepped forward, with his partner close behind.

"I'll ask you to accompany us to Chancellor Edwards' office. There is a matter we need to address following a complaint about you."

"I don't understand!" whispered Blair, paling in fear as his panic responses began to kick in. "What am I supposed to have done? I've been here all morning, I swear! Please can I ring Jim? He's expecting me!"

Ignoring his words, the first officer simply took his arm in a firm grip, and turned to lead him out, nodding to his companion to shut the door and follow them out of the building and towards the Administration block where Chancellor Edwards' plush office was situated.

Neither officer spoke to him again, and both turned deaf ears to his pleas to call Jim, so that, by the time they arrived at the Chancellor's office, Blair was well on the way to a panic attack, while his head began to pound with the effort of trying to hold at bay the angry emotions battering at him without the strength and protection of his Sentinel's mind to bolster him.

Once in the office, Blair was marched up to the Chancellor's large desk, where the woman stood glaring down at him with an expression of disgust tempered with a little unholy glee at what she was about to say.

"Mr Sandburg," she said coldly, giving him no chance to pull himself together. "I have just had one of your students in here, highly distressed. She told me she had just come from a private tutorial with you, and that you made indecent advances to her, to such an extent that she is contemplating pressing charges, hence these officers' presence. What have you to say for yourself? It goes without saying that any such unethical behaviour will naturally call for at the least your dishonourable dismissal from this university. Maybe even a period of incarceration if the case is proven."

Wide-eyed with horror, and shaking in anxiety, Blair could barely breathe, let alone answer her charges. "No nononono, this can't be happening! I didn't, I swear, please, Jim, help me! Please!" and he crumpled to the floor to curl up into a small ball, rocking in distress, and clutching at his head, which was by now pounding unmercifully, beset by the intense anger directed at him.

"Shit!" muttered the first officer. "This is Ellison's Guide! I should have realised before when he said he wanted to call 'Jim'. I've seen them in action at a couple of crime scenes. We'll be lynched if we take him in! I've heard that he's MCU's little mascot, and Ellison doesn't take prisoners!"

"You're kidding!" replied his partner in horror. "Just our fucking luck! What do we do?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm going to call in some backup, like another Sentinel / Guide team. They can run interference for us and take care of the kid before he goes into meltdown."

Frowning at the half-heard exchange, Edwards pointed at Blair, saying, "What do you think you're waiting for? Take him into custody! I've already given you the address of the student so you can interview her. Get him out of my office!"

Gritting his teeth in irritation, the first uniform, Baker, bent down and took hold of Blair's arm again, almost letting go at the moan of pain that resulted from the action. Looking to his partner for support, they managed to get the young man to his feet, and half carried him out to the waiting patrol car, where he was pushed not ungently into the back seat, while Edwards and several passing students and staff members looked on in puzzlement and not a little morbid interest.

Once she was sure that the grad student was settled into the patrol car and would soon be taken downtown for questioning, Chancellor Edwards returned to her office, self-satisfied smirk in place, to phone William Ellison to inform him that his plan had been set in motion.

Meanwhile, Officer Baker was placing a call to Vice to request the backup of one of their Sentinel / Guide teams. He was well aware that unaccompanied bonded Guides needed special handling, even when they hadn't had the sort of traumatic recent past that Blair had suffered,

simply due to their sometimes drastic reactions to empathic overload without their Sentinels' support. It was always advisable to have some experienced backup if not actual medical knowledge, since extreme cases could lead to the administration of medication to calm and dampen the empath's mental distress.

He was more than grateful when he was patched through to the nearest available team of Sentinel Detective Mary Kelly and her Guide Stewart Carlson.

Mary and Stewart had worked alongside Jim and Blair in the Kobyoshi bust, and they were both very fond of the small, shy but talented Alpha Guide, and had even put in an appearance at his recent birthday party. Although self-effacing to an extreme degree, Blair had quietly impressed everyone with his dedication to his Sentinel, and his intelligent and sympathetic contributions to the operation. Added to that his gutsy role as bait in spite of his obvious terror, and he had quite unknowingly earned himself a great deal of respect from the other officers in the joint operation.

Within a few minutes, the pair's unmarked sedan had pulled up behind the patrol unit, and Mary fairly leapt out of the driver's seat, closely followed by Stewart.

"Where've you put him?" she snapped, answering herself instantly as she easily made out the distressed little moans and mutters coming from the back of the unit.

Leaving Stewart to deal with the uniforms, she slid quietly into the back, trying not to frighten the hunched up figure even more.

"Hey Blair, remember me?" she said, speaking softly and unthreateningly, while giving the young man a little space and a moment to recognise her.

Red-rimmed and tear-filled eyes peered up at her, and Blair wordlessly made a tiny movement towards her. Understanding what he was mutely asking, she held out her hands and willingly took the shaking body into her arms, offering the care and protection that all Sentinels felt compelled to provide for distressed Guides, whether or not their own. Although nothing like the depth of comfort his own Sentinel could provide, Blair gratefully accepted Mary's calm support, which he could feel was augmented by that of her Guide, Stewart.

After a few minutes of virtual silence, during which Blair made a valiant effort to pull himself together, the Sentinel / Guide pair confirmed that they would take responsibility for delivering Blair to the PD to be reunited with Jim, and also that they would offer to undertake the investigation into the alleged assault.

Unbelievably grateful for the rescue, the patrolmen returned to the PD without their troublesome passenger in order to write up their reports, and hopefully avoid any confrontation with a super-protective Alpha Sentinel Ellison.

Jim:

Sighing in relief, Jim pulled off his tie and ran his finger around the constricting collar of his dress shirt. He had just returned to the bullpen after a morning spent in court: something he could do without, but a necessary evil which at least he could do by himself without Blair's grounding presence at his side.

Not that he didn't want his Guide as close as possible at all times, but this was one part of the job where hyper senses were least likely to cause a problem, so it was logically a good time for Blair to enjoy a little down time at the U.

Smiling to himself, Jim thought about how his young partner had left that morning, with a happy smile, and a spring in his step, clutching his backpack to him. Jim was well aware of how much Blair appreciated the laptop birthday present he had received from the MCU gang, as well as the small Ford convertible from Jim, which allowed the young man to have a little more independence. Added to that, with the arrival of warmer weather he was now comfortable enough to discard his customary turtleneck sweaters in exchange for lighter weight long sleeved Henleys, as wearing the concealing Native American choker and wolf pendant Jim had given him had made Blair less self-conscious about the tattoo around his neck.

As for Jim himself, he was only too happy to see a little more of his Guide's beautiful body on display, and he made no bones about telling Blair how much he was loved.

His smile broadened as he recalled Blair's pausing at the loft door, to turn back and run to Jim for a hug and another kiss before leaving, needing a bit of reassurance that Jim really could survive without him for a few hours, and that his Sentinel was truly OK with Blair having a bit of time to himself.

He waved distractedly at the scattered greetings called out to him, and headed a bit tiredly to his desk.

"Well, how did it go?" questioned Megan Connor, who had crossed over to him, file clutched in her hand. "Did you manage to get Bartholomew convicted?"

Nodding, with a slightly smug expression spreading over his face, Jim replied, "Yep, all done and dusted. I had thought for a second that his wife would retract her statement, because she seemed really ill at ease, but she stuck to her guns and shopped the bastard. He won't be assaulting any more school kids in a hurry!"

"Great going, Jimbo! It's good to get a slimeball like that off the streets. Sandy got quite upset when you two questioned the miserable waste of breathe."

Smile slipping a bit, Jim agreed. "You're right, Connor. He said as soon as he 'read' the guy that he felt really creeped out. That kid's usually so forgiving of folks it's hard to get him to say a bad word about anybody!"

Megan replied, "Not so much a 'kid' now, after all he's achieved in such a short time!. I think that's what makes him such a beautiful person, no mush intended! He genuinely believes that there's good in everyone –; well, most folks –; even those that hurt him."

Slapping Jim on the shoulder in a friendly farewell, she headed back to her own desk, only to turn back to stare inquisitively at Jim, who had jumped back to his feet, head cocked in his classic 'hearing' posture.

As Megan and the other MCU personnel looked on in consternation, Jim growled out, "Shit! Blair's in the building, and he's really upset. He's being taken up to Vice!" and without another word, Jim was running out of the bullpen, unheeding of the questions following in his wake.

Megan, along with her partner Joel, who had just stepped out of his office as Jim made his hurried exit, quickly followed after the Sentinel, exchanging a worried glance.

Not bothering to wait for the elevator, Jim bolted down the two flights of stairs to the Vice Unit's floor, and charged towards the interview room which held his Guide. Completely ignoring queries and challenges thrown at him he burst through the door to see his tearful and trembling Guide being comforted by Mary Kelly.

Knowing that Jim was on his way, and liable to be angry and unpredictable, she moved aside quickly and gathered up her own Guide, stepping back against the far wall to give the primal Alpha some space.

Swiftly crossing the room, and dropping to his knees to put himself at eye level with the distraught young man huddled in the hard chair behind the battered desk, he found himself immediately landed with an armful of sobbing Guide, who was clinging on to him as if his life depended upon it, stammering out disjointed phrases and apologies.

"Jimmeee! I'm so s s sorry, man...didn't do it, I swear...d d don't k k know why sh sh she said it, I didn't, I w w wouldn't! I'm yours, only yours...! Please believe me, J Jimmm!"

"Ssshhh, baby, calm down a bit, love. Take some deep breaths for me OK? That's right. Now, let's hear what Mary has to say, then you can tell me what happened, OK? Link with me now."

Seeing that Jim seemed to have himself under reasonable control, Mary stepped forward, although she did make sure Stewart was slightly behind her, automatically shielding him from possible adverse reactions by the near-feral Alpha.

"I'm really sorry, Sentinel Ellison," she began, choosing to keep the discussion formal for the time being.

"We responded to a call from Rainier by two uniforms who had been summoned to an alleged assault. It seems that some student that Guide Sandburg had been tutoring had complained to Chancellor Edwards that Blair made indecent advances towards her, and threatened her with

assault." Pausing for a second while she monitored the responses to her statement, namely snarling from Jim and a whimpered denial from Blair, she continued.

"Baker, one of the patrolmen, recognised Guide Sandburg, and didn't want to risk him overloading, so he called in some Sentinel / Guide backup. We were nearest, so we took over. I knew Blair needed some support, and I thought it best to get him away from Rainier as soon as possible. We have the address of the student who made the complaint, and I intend to follow up on the questioning as soon as you've calmed Blair down a bit. For what it's worth, I've already made a statement for the record that my senses lead me to believe that Blair is telling the truth, although any inquiry may want a second independent Sentinel opinion."

Taking a deep breath, and using all his considerable strength of character to control his urge to rip someone, preferably the lying student, apart with his bare hands, Jim finally nodded.

"Thanks, Mary, Stewart. Both Blair and I appreciate your handling of the situation so far. I'd prefer to interview this student myself, but I know that won't be allowed, so I'd appreciate it if you report back to me as soon as you're done. Blair doesn't need to be under suspicion any longer than necessary."

"Sure thing, Sentinel Ellison. We want to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible too. There's something very fishy about the whole set up. And I didn't feel happy with the 'vibes' I was getting from Chancellor Edwards. She was back in her office phoning someone when we left, although I didn't recognise who it was. Stewart thinks she's up to something, and I agree with him."

So saying, she put a friendly hand on her Guide's shoulder, and steered him out of the small room, with a final reassuring comment. "Take care, Blair. I'm sure we can get this sorted quickly. See you two soon."

As the pair left, another uniformed officer stepped in to keep watch, although Jim completely ignored him. Sitting on the other chair, he settled Blair on his lap, and cuddled the slender body close, rubbing soothing circles on the shaking back with a gentle hand.

Meanwhile, Megan and Joel positioned themselves outside the interview room, ready to run interference if required against unwelcome intruders.

A short while later, Blair had calmed down somewhat, thanks to the comfort and support offered from Jim through their shared link. Jim was also well able to discern his Guide's total innocence of the charges levelled against him, and did his best to keep his anger under as much control as he could so as not to distress Blair any more than necessary.

When Captain Sullivan from Vice entered the room, accompanied by both Simon Banks and Director Kingsley from the Sentinel / Guide Department, Blair had himself under enough control to be able to answer their questions, as long as Jim maintained his supporting hold on both his body and his troubled mind.

Explaining to the other men how he had been asked to take on the new student against his better judgement, he described her distracted state during the tutorial, but admitted he had attributed it to her claims that she was afraid of failing her Anthro class which would put her seriously behind in her credits. He told them how she had thanked him at the end of the session, and had left on time with no more than a handshake.

When he described the entry of the two patrol officers, and the interview with Chancellor Edwards, Jim could barely restrain himself from leaping to his feet to go and tackle the witch face to face.

After Blair had finished his statement, and had answered the few questions posed to clarify various points, Simon spoke up.

"Well, I don't know about you people, but it certainly sounds like a put up job to me, that is, provided Guide Sandburg is telling the truth.

"Now, Jim!" he continued quickly at his detective's immediate angry reaction to his words. "I'm not saying he's lying, far from it! It's just that it would be beneficial to obtain a totally independent sentinel 'lie-detector' test to back up Sentinel Kelly's and your statements, after which I'm sure any judge will have no problem with believing him should it ever get to trial. Personally, I'm thinking it'll never get that far. Whoever is behind this may think they're being very clever, but they obviously don't understand, or at least have underestimated, the sanctity of the bond."

"I agree with Captain Banks," said Adam Kingsley. "I know it's hard for *mundanes* who have limited contact with and knowledge of Sentinel / Guide pairs to fully comprehend just how deep the link goes between bonded pairs. And they certainly have difficulty with grasping the virtually infallible contribution played by sentinel senses when it comes to interviews, just as they misunderstand the gift of empathy in guides, and think they are mind-reading or some such. I feel certain that Sentinel Kelly and Guide Carlson will get to the bottom of this girl's reasons for making the accusation."

Relaxing slightly, Jim nodded his agreement and eased Blair off his lap and on to the other chair, although he kept hold of the young man's hand. He thanked the men for their understanding and support of his Guide, grateful to have such well-informed and well-intentioned friends and colleagues.

At Captain Sullivan's suggestion, Jim and Blair followed Simon back to the elevator to return to the MCU bullpen, where they could sit in a bit more comfort while they waited for the outcome of Mary and Stewart's interview with Melanie Turner.

Accompanied by Megan and Joel, the party entered the bullpen, where Rhonda appeared almost immediately with a cup of hot chocolate for her favourite Guide and anthropologist, which earned her a genuine, if slightly watery smile from Blair.

Smiling his own thanks for the secretary's thoughtfulness, Jim sat down next to the young man, after sending Megan and Joel back to their own work with warm words of appreciation for their support.

A couple of hours later, Jim, knowing that although they had missed lunch, Blair probably wouldn't feel much like eating, had the idea of sending out for some soup for his Guide and a sub for himself. He called to Megan, who was hovering in easy reach, and she grinned in agreement before leaving the bullpen to call in at the deli just down from the PD.

When she returned, carrying a large beef with mustard on rye for Jim and a cup of chicken soup for him, Blair whispered heart-felt thanks, and took the soup, feeling the first pangs of hunger at the delicious aroma.

"No worries, love," said Megan with a smile. "You have to keep your strength up to watch out for Jimbo there. He'd be a basket case without you, mate," she added, nudging Jim playfully as he was about to take a bite out of his sandwich.

"Your faith in me truly astounds me," growled Jim, but with the suspicion of a twinkle in his eyes belying the harsh words.

Laughing, Megan went back to her own desk with a parting shot. "Don't you worry, Sandy. It'll be OK, you'll see!"

At Blair's grateful smile, she winked and went back to work.

Not long after, Jim had finished his sub, and Blair had managed a good portion of his soup. Suddenly, Jim looked up and said, "Kelly and Carlson are back. Let's hope they've got something useful to report, Chief!"

Quickly putting down the unfinished cup of soup, Blair grabbed Jim's sleeve in reawakened anxiety, and turned to look towards the bullpen door to see Mary and Stewart entering.

Walking quickly straight over to Jim's desk, Mary offered a small smile of satisfaction, while Stewart laid a comforting hand on Blair's shoulder.

"We're ready to report in about what we've discovered, Sentinel Ellison, but Captain Sullivan wants to get everyone together so we don't have to go over everything more than once, so I hope you won't mind being patient a bit longer. It'll be worth it, I think," she finished with a wider smile encompassing both Jim and Blair.

Sure enough, the door reopened to admit Sullivan and Director Kingsley, who had been alerted to the new meeting. Emerging from his office, Simon greeted the newcomers, and led them all to the conference room down the hall where everyone else took a seat around three sides of the

table, leaving the fourth to Jim and Blair, who sat with thighs and shoulders pressed together and hands clasped as Blair fought to control his nervousness.

Coughing to attract everyone's attention, and leaning forward to rest his elbows on the table, Captain Sullivan began by saying that the best place to begin the second meeting was to hear the report by Sentinel Kelly and Guide Carlson, newly returned from interviewing Melanie Turner, the student who had made the allegations of indecent behaviour by Guide Sandburg.

White faced and trembling visibly, Blair clutched hard at Jim's hand, and prepared to hear the worst despite Mary Kelly's previous reassurance.

However, what he was about to hear both relieved and saddened him, as it hurt and infuriated his Sentinel and the others present on his behalf. Having said that, Blair, being Blair, simply failed to comprehend the concept, since he was totally unaware of being worthy of their anger and disgust on his account.

What transpired at the interview was quickly recounted by Mary Kelly, who began by saying that she and Stewart had tracked down the student at her flat, where they questioned her regarding her accusation. At first acting indignant and tearful, Melanie had reiterated her allegations, even adding a bit more detail for effect, but she had soon caved in after further questioning, especially when confronted by Sentinel Kelly's hard-nosed attitude and the corroborating evidence of sentinel senses at work. Eventually fearing for her own safety, such was the anger and disgust emanating from the Sentinel and Guide team, that she described in detail how she had been approached by a man who had offered her a substantial amount of money for bringing Blair Sandburg up on charges. Although she had no personal grudge against the grad student -; didn't even really know him - her desperate need for funds led her to agree to the plan, although she maintained, truthfully, that she had no idea who was actually behind the plot. She only wanted to take the money and run, figuratively speaking. She was now downstairs being charged with false accusation and wasting police time.

Almost overwhelmed with relief, Blair addressed Mary in a shaky but grateful tone. "Thank you so much, Sentinel Kelly and Guide Carlson. You don't know how much it means to me that you took on this investigation. I'm so grateful to you both, and to everyone here for believing in me."

"Oh, I think we all have a fair idea, Chief," said Jim with a smile, tousling the chestnut curls, even though he was seething inside with the need to track down the creep behind the whole plot. For the present, though, he was simply glad to have his Guide's name cleared so quickly and effectively.

Clearing his voice, Simon spoke up. "Well, I think we've heard enough, gentlemen and lady. I for one can't see this going any further except to try and find out the motive behind this nasty little plan. Jim, why don't you take Blair on home now for some rest? He looks all in!"

"Thanks, Captain, I will." Jim accepted the offer with gratitude and helped his unresisting partner to his feet, tucking him close to his side with an arm wrapped firmly around Blair's waist. Shyly whispering his thanks to one and all again, Blair allowed himself to be led out of the room by his beloved Sentinel, leaning gratefully against the muscular body and soaking up the strength and support so willingly offered.

"If it's OK with you, Chief, I'll ask Megan or Joel to pick up your car and backpack from the U. I think it's in your best interest for now to keep a low profile for a few days. Besides, the summer vacation is coming up fast, so you won't really be missing much, will you?"

With a deep sigh, Blair replied, saying, "I think you're right, Jim. I'd like to pick up my car and my stuff myself, but I know that I don't really want to risk coming into contact with Chancellor Edwards for a while. Even if she's been proven wrong, she still hates me, and obviously wants an excuse to get rid of me. But I have no idea why!" he finished on a plaintive note. "I don't know what I've done to offend her!"

"It might not be anything specifically to do with you personally, Chief," mused Jim. "It could be that someone else has an axe to grind, and that someone has instigated all this just to get you out of the picture. I just want to find out who that someone is...!"

Dropping the subject for now before Blair could get any more agitated on his behalf, Jim grabbed their jackets before having a quick word with Joel, who immediately offered to get a lift with Megan to the U and pick up Blair's car and backpack. Collecting the appropriate sets of keys from his young friend, he smiled encouragingly and patted Blair's arm, before leaving the bullpen on Megan's heels.

With a general goodnight to the bullpen at large, Jim and Blair headed for the elevator and parking garage, to drive home via a Thai takeout place that they both liked, where Jim left his exhausted partner dozing in the truck's passenger seat while he bought a selection of dishes to share.

Later that night, having managed to get a few bites of food inside his semi-comatose Guide, Jim cleared everything away, putting the leftovers in the refrigerator, and steered the young man to the bathroom to do the necessary and freshen up a little. Half carrying the drooping young man up to the bedroom, he smiled as Blair began to snore softly almost as soon as his head hit the pillows, completely oblivious of Jim's efforts in stripping him down to his underwear, and tucking him carefully under the comforter.

Although not particularly tired himself, Jim decided to retire early also, submitting willingly to the lure of a cosy cuddle with a warm and pliant body in preference to a late night watching TV alone downstairs.

Just before he locked up for the night, he heard Joel drive up to 852 in Blair's small car, and park it beside the truck in front of the building, obviously having finally finished work for the day. Opening the door at the older detective's knock rather than surprising him by jumping the gun as he was sometimes wont to do, Jim smiled in thanks when the kindly older man held out Blair's backpack. Refusing to come in, as Megan was waiting in her car downstairs to take him back to the PD to pick up his own vehicle, he waved goodnight and made his way to the elevator and his lift back.

Placing Blair's keys in the basket by the door, and the backpack safely in the small office under the stairs, Jim finished his tour of the loft, and, confident everything was locked up tight, he took himself up to bed to enjoy his anticipated cuddle with his Guide.

The following morning, Blair awoke to the gently touch of sentinel-sensitive fingers stroking the soft skin of his neck and shoulders while he lay in his customary sleeping position, face tucked into Jim's neck, with his arm draped over the washboard abs of his Sentinel's stomach, and a leg thrown across Jim's thighs.

Pulling back a little to peer up at Jim's smiling face looking down at him; he whispered a sleepy, "Morning Jim," and lifted his head up for Jim to capture his mouth for a first kiss of the day. In the back of his mind, he sometimes wondered how sentinel senses could cope with what he was certain had to be 'morning breath', but, as Jim never commented on it, and actually instigated the kisses, he assumed it was OK.

With a small smile, he settled his head back on to Jim's shoulder, which prompted Jim to question him. "What's with the smile, Chief? Care to share?"

"Um, well, I was just thinking that...um...doesn't my 'morning breath' offend your senses? I mean, I love waking up to your kisses, but I just wondered if it was as good for you?"

Breaking into genuine chuckles, Jim replied, "Only you, babe, would worry about bad breath when I'm trying to make love to you! For your information, Einstein, you could never taste bad to me, even if you'd eaten curry the night before! The great thing about how you've enabled me to use these senses means I can filter out anything that isn't pure, delicious 'Blair-taste'. Now you, on the other hand, don't have that facility, so how do *you* manage, kiddo?"

Blushing with a little embarrassment and a whole lot of love, Blair raised his head again to gaze adoringly at his Sentinel before saying, "There's nothing about you that could make me not want to comply with your every wish, Jim. I love you so much, and I need to let you know in every way I can."

Pinking even more at the rather sappy statement, he ducked his head a little, but knew that he shouldn't really be surprised when, far from making a joke of his declaration, Jim firmly but carefully raised Blair's face up to his again by placing a finger under the younger man's chin.

Smiling tenderly at his Guide's beautiful but shy expression; Jim simply took another kiss from the succulent mouth.

Some while later, they resurfaced to take their customary (and very satisfying) shared shower, and grab some breakfast before heading down to the PD.

Since Blair had no intention of going in to Rainier today, they both climbed into Jim's truck armed with travel mugs of good coffee, as their impromptu lovemaking had made them a little late for wolfing down much more than a breakfast bagel to keep them going.

The drive to the PD was made in relative silence, with the two men lost in their thoughts, and taking the occasional sip of hot coffee.

Eventually, Jim spoke up, wanting to get his Guide to open up to him, although he knew already through their shared connection that the young man was very troubled.

"Hey, Chief. Penny for them! Care to share, baby? I can hear your mind working from here."

Responding with a small smile and appreciating Jim's efforts to cheer him up, Blair worried at his lower lip for a few moments before speaking.

"I'm sorry for being so down, Jim. I don't mean to create an atmosphere or anything. It's just that I can't stop thinking about Melanie. I mean, I know what it's like to struggle to make ends meet, but why would she choose that way to get money? She admitted she didn't even really know me, and said it wasn't personal, but I don't understand how anyone could do what she did just for payment. If it hadn't been for our bond, and the connection we have to other Sentinel / Guide pairs who know me and believed in me, I could have been dismissed without references at the least, and maybe even gone to prison. I don't understand, man." He looked away, misery creeping over his expressive face as it seemed that yet another tiny bit of innocence was stripped away from his gentle soul.

"Look at me, baby," Jim commanded softly, reaching over to grasp Blair's knee and give it a gentle shake.

When his Guide complied, turning his sorrowful, round eyes up to meet Jim's glance, Jim continued as he turned his attention back to the road. "I can't answer that for you, Chief, not in any deep, meaningful way, but I can and do say that there are many more good people out there who make up for the selfish and evil ones who make our job as police officers and protectors so necessary. I'm just so sorry that you've come across so much bad in your life, and I'm truly grateful that you haven't let it damage your soul, baby. You're still the most generous and loving partner I could have wished for. Gorgeous too! And if that sounds mushy," he continued with a loving smile, "then so be it. I can do mush, as long as it's for you!"

Pleased when Blair responded with a happy giggle, he concentrated once more on negotiating a safe path through the rush hour traffic until they finally pulled up in the PD parking garage in much better spirits.

When they entered the MCU bullpen, Blair tucked in close to Jim's side as usual, there were a few greetings from the fairly small number of people present, and, on reaching their shared desk, Jim spotted a post-it note stuck to the computer screen, asking him to call Mary Kelly as soon as possible.

"Looks like Mary and Stewart have something to report, Chief," he muttered, and picked up the phone to make an internal call while Blair hung up their jackets and plopped his ever-present backpack down behind his usual chair.

A couple of minutes later, after a brief exchange, Jim put the phone down and turned to Blair saying, "Come on, Chief. Mary's got some info for us regarding the set up, and suggests meeting up with her and Stewart down in Vice."

Nodding in response, Blair got quickly to his feet and followed Jim's long-legged stride out of the bullpen, almost running to keep up until Jim stopped and turned round to take him in a quick hug before tucking him into his side again.

"Sorry, Chief. I forgot for a moment that you were there –; guess I'm in a rush to find out something concrete to go on. Let's hope we can get everything wrapped up real soon, because I for one am really looking forward to rubbing that bitch Edwards' nose in it when we get proof of complicity," he finished with a grim smile.

Blair ducked his head at that, knowing full well that the Sentinel needed to take some decisive action in solving a situation that threatened his bond mate, but still uncomfortable in his own mind about taking any such vengeful steps on his own behalf.

He kept such thoughts to himself, not wishing to seem to challenge Jim's instinctive protective urge, and simply concentrated on sending love and support through their link.

They were met at the door of the Vice Unit by Sentinel Detective Kelly and Guide Carlson, both of whom wore serious expressions. Gesturing to Jim and Blair to follow her, Mary said formally, "Please come this way, Alpha Sentinel Ellison, Alpha Guide Sandburg. We do have some information for you, but it may not be what you want to hear."

So saying, she opened the door to one of the unoccupied interview rooms and stood aside for them to enter.

When Jim and Blair were seated, Jim obviously growing more impatient by the minute, she and Stewart sat opposite the pair and she began.

"As you know, I reported hearing Chancellor Edwards making a phone call as we were taking care of Blair, but I didn't recognise the person she was speaking to. Anyway, Stewart went through the phone records for me, and pinned down the number she called. I'm sorry to have to tell you, Alpha, that it was to William Ellison's private line at Ellison Enterprises." At Jim's angry growl, she continued hastily, "Of course that doesn't mean that it was your father she was speaking to. It could be anyone else with access to his office. All I know is that the voice I heard was definitely male."

Jumping to his feet in barely controlled fury, Jim spun round to face them, and spat out, "It's OK, Kelly. You don't have to make excuses for him. I'm pretty damned certain that it was my father. It bears all the hallmarks of the type of action he would take."

Turning to face Blair, he held the young man's troubled gaze and continued, "You know when he called in at Thanksgiving while you were asleep on the sofa?"

Blair nodded and replied unhappily, "Yes, Jim. You told me he wasn't best pleased to find out that not only was I male, but damaged too..."

"I'm sorry honey," continued Jim, walking up to Blair to put his hands on his Guide's shoulders in a comforting gesture. "He was more than angry -; spitting mad, really. I should have known he'd try and do something like this. That bastard still wants me to join him at Ellison Enterprises despite already having Steven at his beck and call. I was always the prodigal son as far as he's concerned, but he can't get it through his head that I don't ever intend to return to the fold! I chose to join the army to escape from his influence, and I also chose the PD for the same reason. And our bond is the best thing that ever happened to me, babe, even if I didn't deliberately set out to choose you. We were meant to be together, Blair, and he'll never part us, that I swear!"

"Hey," he continued when he saw slow tears begin to slide down his Guide's miserable face. "Don't take on, lover. It'll be OK, I promise!"

No one in the room was surprised, however, when Blair replied, "B b but he wouldn't be mad if I wasn't a nobody, Jim. And I'm damaged, dirty! How can you say that it'll be OK? He'll never accept me -; no one in his position could! I'm so sorry."

Pulling the young man into a close embrace, Jim hugged him for a few moments before pushing him away a little so he could look into the wet eyes. Shaking him gently by the upper arms to emphasise his words, Jim said, "Once and for all, baby, YOU are the single most important person in the world for me. Even if you really *were* a 'damaged nobody', it wouldn't change a thing as far as I'm concerned. YOU are MY Guide, Chief, and no one is ever going to change that. Got it?"

Sniffing, the Guide ducked his head for a second before meeting his Sentinel's forthright gaze. "I got it, Jim," he whispered. "Thank you for loving me so much."

"No problem, kiddo!" replied Jim, glad that Blair's mini crisis of confidence seemed to be over for now.

"Now, if Mary and Stewart don't mind, I have a father to visit!"

"Certainly, Alpha. Do you need back up, or is it something you'd rather do in private?" Mary replied somewhat cautiously, knowing that it probably wasn't the best idea for the senior Sentinel / Guide team to go into a potentially volatile situation without witnesses.

Realising where the other Sentinel was coming from, Jim nodded in rueful agreement.

"Yes, I think it would be a good idea to have you two along, because god knows if he really is involved in this dirty little plot, I may well have to kill him!" And everyone present was uncomfortably aware that he wasn't altogether joking.

A short time later, having advised Simon of their destination, (and, incidentally, only receiving his blessing when he learned that Kelly and Carlson would be going along also) the two pairs set out for Ellison Enterprise's plush office complex in one of the most up-market of Cascade's business areas, arriving at more or less the same time despite travelling in two separate vehicles.

Nodding to the other pair, Jim, with a supporting arm wrapped around Blair's waist, took the lead and entered the vaulted reception area and approached the extremely smart young woman at the desk.

Growling a little at her snooty glance at his Guide, Jim snapped, "I want to see William Ellison right now. Tell him it's his son, and it's police business!"

Backing up nervously, the woman nevertheless spoke up firmly. "I can't let you go up without an appointment. Mr Ellison is a very busy man."

"Look, lady, you can either call him right now, or we'll go up unannounced. I don't think you'll like his reaction if I take him by surprise, will you?"

Nodding quickly, she reached for her phone and rang William's private room, biting her lip worriedly until he answered with a barked, "Ellison!"

"I'm sorry, sir," she began, "but there are some police officers here to see you, and one of them says he's your son--"

"My son, you say? Well, send them up, woman!" snapped her boss, hanging up immediately.

Turning her attention back to Jim, she indicated the private elevator on the opposite side of the room. "Mr Ellison says for you to go on up. He has the office suite on the top floor."

Nodding brusquely, Jim steered his Guide over towards the elevator, and pressed the button for the fifth floor. When the car arrived, the four of them entered, maintaining a grim silence until they arrived at a heavy mahogany door bearing William Ellison's name on a polished brass plate

William, who was as yet unaware that his little plot to remove Blair from Rainier had foundered, smiled smugly when he learned of his older son's visit. He was convinced that the way was now clear to take the first steps in reconciling Jimmy to his destiny as Ellison Enterprise's next CEO, and was already planning which socially acceptable Guides he could introduce him to, should his son still require such a person.

Answering the sharp knock on his office door with a hearty, "Come on in, son!" he looked up expectantly at the doorway, only to frown in consternation at the sight of Jim hugging that disgusting hippy boy close to his side, and followed in by a tough-looking partnership who could only be another Sentinel / Guide pair.

"Hi *Dad*." Jim's terse greeting dripped with sarcasm as he continued, "Good of you to see us. I've got a few questions I'd like you to answer regarding a little matter of framing my Guide for an assault charge. What have you to say?"

Spluttering in confusion, William countered with, "I don't know what you're talking about, son! How dare you waltz in here for the first time in years just to accuse me of underhand practices! I suppose that *boy* has put you up to this," he spat, pointing an accusing finger at Blair.

"No, sir, that is not the case," the stern young lady Sentinel spoke up. "We have reason to believe that a telephone call to this office was made yesterday by Chancellor Edwards of Rainier University. It was overheard while Guide Sandburg here was being wrongly accused of indecently assaulting a student, who has since confessed to being paid to make the allegations. I don't suppose you'd know who might be behind the plan, would you, sir?" she finished grimly.

"If there was a call to this office, I don't know who received it," snapped William, uncomfortably aware that there were two sentinels present who were undoubtedly reading his physiological responses, and who would likely detect his guilt. However, he had no intention of openly admitting to setting the little hippy bastard up to take a fall, and was still convinced he could talk his way out of trouble. After all, why should his son and the other officers take an ex-slave boy and sex toy's part over his?

Standing up behind his huge desk, he leaned forward, frowning in his most intimidating manner, hoping to gain some small advantage from his status as one of Cascade's leading businessmen.

"I want you all to leave now if you've nothing else to say. I'll be calling my lawyer and will be in touch if you persist in this fabrication. Good day!"

"Not so fast, *Dad*," his son responded in his most uncompromising tone. "We both know you're aware of sentinel abilities in sensing liars even if you don't have much concept about the nature

of the bond. Well, unfortunately for you, there are two here who can testify to your 'obfuscations' so you may as well come clean. Why the hell did you do it, Dad? What did you hope to gain; and what did you promise Chancellor Edwards for her complicity?"

Snarling in fury, William emerged from behind his desk. The game was up, so he might as well drive his point home and say his piece. It might even do Jimmy good to hear it spoken out loud.

"You want to know why I did it, do you? Why I would bribe that money-grubbing bitch Edwards with the promise of a new sports complex for her precious university if she backed up my scheme? Why I would go to the trouble of finding some penniless and unscrupulous student to accuse that little bastard of doing something which he probably does all the time with his 'training' and 'experience'?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Jimmy! It's because I care about what people think of you, and I want you back here with me where you belong, running this company as it should be run. I'm sick of seeing you waste yourself as a lowly police officer when you could be making serious money right here! And I'm REALLY sick to my stomach to see you coupled to a fatherless slutty boy-toy who can only make you a laughing stock in polite circles! There! Now are you satisfied?"

With a cry of pure rage, Jim rushed forward intending to tear the man limb from limb, disregarding his Guide's panicked attempt to hold him back.

"No, Jim! Please don't! He's not worth you getting into trouble for, Jim, please stop!" and Blair tried to pull on his furious Sentinel's arm, only to be flung aside in Jim's blind anger.

Hurled part way across the huge office, Blair lost his footing to land with a crash onto a glass-topped occasional table, which shattered under the pressure to slice open the young man's hands with razor sharp shards.

Crying out in fear and pain, Blair clutched his bleeding hands to his chest, while the other pair sprang into action, with Stewart rushing to Blair's side with the intention of treating his injuries while Mary pushed William out of the way of his primal Alpha Sentinel son.

However, in the instant of hearing the smashing of glass accompanied by the smell of his Guide's blood, and hearing his beloved Blair's cry of pain, Jim immediately snapped out of his black rage, and rushed to the young man's side.

"Oh god, Chief, I'm so sorry!" he cried in anguish. "I didn't mean to hurt you, baby. I didn't even think, I was so intent on throttling that bastard!" and he threw a disgusted glance over at William, who was standing open-mouthed in shock, surveying the scene unfolding in front of him.

Turning back to Blair and completely dismissing William from his mind, Jim gently pulled his Guide's smaller hands out from the shelter of Blair's armpits where the young man had thrust them in pained reaction, and quickly scanned the damage.

"I'm going to take him to the ER," said Jim, addressing Stewart, who was still hovering nearby. "These are going to need stitches, and I think there's still some glass embedded in this one," he continued, peering at a particularly deep slash across Blair's left palm.

"I'm so sorry, baby," he said softly to his smaller partner, who was crying quietly in shock and pain. "I have no right to ask you, but I hope you can forgive me sometime for doing this to you. It was completely unintentional, sweetheart. I just couldn't see past my blind fury at *him*. Not that that's any excuse! I'm so sorry, lover. I know you were only trying to do your job." And he quickly wrapped the young man's hands in strips of cloth torn from his own shirt rather than wait until Stewart searched for a first aid kit.

Mary, knowing that Jim was now totally focussed on his Guide's welfare, concentrated instead on taking William into custody, as the man was too rattled right now to make any more complaints or excuses.

It was a strange group that emerged from the private elevator a few minutes later, what with a tall, concerned man in a torn-up shirt supporting a smaller, blood stained and tearful partner, while a shocked and bemused William Ellison was escorted from the building by two tall and serious-looking officers.

The smart receptionist could only stare at the party in open-mouthed shock as they piled into the two waiting vehicles, with William settled in the back seat of the unmarked sedan to be taken down town by Mary and Stewart, and Blair placed carefully in the truck's passenger seat to be whisked off to the ER by his deeply upset and contrite Sentinel.

Driving at a reckless speed, Jim completed the trip to Cascade General in double quick time, and pulled up in one of the nearest free parking bays, irrespective of whether they were legal or not. Throwing the truck into park, he jumped out of the cab and ran around to the passenger door, to reach in and lift his Guide out. He noted worriedly that the young man was shivering a little in shock, and that the shirt material wrapping his hands was now sopping with blood that oozed continuously out of the raw gashes.

Biting his trembling lip in pain, Blair tried so hard to stop crying, but the hurt coupled with the shock of being pushed aside by his adored Sentinel made such fortitude well nigh impossible, and he swallowed around the sobs which were threatening to overtake him.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean to cause any trouble...but it hurts!" he whispered.

"Sssh, sweetheart. You didn't cause any trouble –; that's all down to me," replied Jim grimly, wrapping a supporting arm around his Guide's waist to help him in to the ER, where he immediately called for assistance.

Seeing the blood staining the whole front of the young man's shirt, the approaching nurse immediately gestured for the pair to follow her to a cubicle, where she told Jim to help Blair up onto the gurney. Once advised that they needed a doctor from the Sentinel unit, she nodded and quickly left the cubicle to phone up to the Sentinel ward for an appropriate member of staff.

It was scant minutes later when Dr Stevens entered the cubicle, having heard the call for assistance, and feeling fairly sure from the nurse's description with whom he would be dealing once again.

"Sentinel Ellison, Guide Sandburg," he greeted in a friendly but soft voice.

"What have we here? You're in quite a mess there young man, aren't you?" he said, approaching the shivering figure on the gurney in an unthreatening manner, since the last thing he needed was for an overprotective Alpha Sentinel to go into primal mode.

"Can you tell me what happened?" he continued, looking at them both enquiringly.

"It was my fault," Jim answered immediately. "I pushed Blair away during an altercation with a suspect, and he fell through a glass-topped table. It was totally my fault!"

"Please don't say that, Jim," whispered his Guide in a shaky voice. "It was an accident, Doctor. I was trying to hold on to Jim's arm and he pulled away from me, that's all. He didn't mean to do it."

"All right, that's all I need to know for now," broke in Dr Stevens, not wanting the budding guilt-fest to get in the way of his treatment of the still seeping wounds.

"Let's get you into a gown young man, and out of those blood-stained clothes so I can begin to clean you up. I'll get you a clean scrub top also," he said to Jim. "There's not much of your shirt left!"

So saying, he called to a nearby nurse, who went off and quickly retrieved a scrub top for Jim which Jim slipped on gratefully once he had helped Blair out of his blood-covered Henley and into the backless gown.

Talking quietly to the still rather shocky young man, Dr Stevens cleaned the area round the deep cuts as gently as possible, although Blair still uttered a few half-stifled moans.

Jim could do nothing at that point but gently stroke his Guide's head, massaging the scalp in an effort to sooth and comfort.

Eventually, Dr Stevens was satisfied that all the glass fragments had been removed, even asking Jim to double-check for him, then he injected the sites of the deeper cuts with local anaesthetic so he could begin to stitch them.

As he worked, he said, "These will be painful for a while, Blair, and you'll be restricted in your movements until the stitches come out, but there's no nerve or tendon damage that I can see, thank Heavens. You should get back your full mobility within a few weeks, but you must take care not to try to do too much and pull the stitches, and you must try to keep the cuts dry. I'm sure Jim will help you with awkward tasks, though."

Jim just nodded in mute agreement, and continued with carding his hand through the chestnut curls while he waited for the doctor to finish up.

A few minutes later, Dr Stevens snipped the end of the final stitch, and placed a loose gauze dressing over each wound, which he bound carefully so that Blair looked as if he was wearing puffy white mittens.

"There you go, young man, and keep away from glass tables in future!" said the kindly doctor, patting his young patient on the shoulder.

Turning to address Jim, he said, "Take him home for some rest, Jim. He needs to be kept warm, even if it is supposed to be Cascade's excuse for early summer. He's still a little shocky, and should have something soothing like sweet tea when you get in. He can have over-the-counter painkillers when he needs them, but he shouldn't need to come back except to get the stitches removed, unless there's any sign of infection. I'm sure you'll be the first to notice that, though."

Then, lowering his voice to sentinel pitch, he added, "Whatever it was that caused the accident, Jim, you should try not to dwell on it for Blair's sake. He truly seems to think it wasn't your fault, so just concentrate on looking after him, all right? I'm no psychiatrist, and I don't want to preach to you, but I can't see that carrying around a huge burden of guilt is going to have any beneficial effect on either of you. Forgive my audacity, but I think it's for the best."

Stomping down on his instinctive desire to bristle with indignation at the offered advice, Jim sighed deeply and said, "You're right, Dr Stevens, and I appreciate that you just want what's best for us –;Blair in particular. I agree with you, even if it'll be hard for me to do as you suggest. Thanks again Doc." After shaking the doctor's hand, he turned back to help ease his young Guide gently down off the gurney, and supported him out of the ER and back to the truck for the drive home.

The drive back to the loft was completed in silence and much more slowly, with Jim casting worried glances at the withdrawn figure huddled into the corner of the passenger seat.

On arrival at 852 Prospect, Jim helped the younger man down from the cab, and guided him up to the loft with an arm round his waist, but was well aware of the minute stiffness in Blair's body at Jim's touch, and the resistance he could feel in his Guide's mind as he tried to link with him.

When they entered #307, Jim moved to steer Blair towards the bathroom and then to bed, hoping to have at least a little mutual rest and cuddling, even if Blair's impaired touch meant that there was no chance of instigating a full bond right now. He was taken aback when Blair stood his ground and ducked his head, biting his lip again in palpable anxiety.

Shivering with trepidation, he shot a nervous glance first at Jim's concerned face, then at the hand that was grasping his bicep, and finally towards the office door. Whispering sentinel-soft, he said "Please don't be angry with me, Jim, but, I...I'm so sorry -; I don't want to upset you, but...I need to be alone for a while. Please, can I just sit in the office for a bit? Oh, please don't be mad!" he finished, chin quivering with the effort of containing a sob when he saw the coldness that crept across his Sentinel's face.

Bitterly hurt, even though he knew he could hardly blame Blair, Jim still couldn't help his irrational and angry reaction, or control his instinctive withdrawal although it would upset his Guide even more.

Releasing Blair's arm and stepping back smartly from his lover's side, he said brusquely, "Sure, Sandburg. Go ahead. It's not like you don't have a reason to avoid me, is it? Let me know when you can tolerate being around me again, huh? I'll be right here!" And he turned away and stomped over to the kitchen to grab a beer out of the refrigerator, ignoring the pained expression and hurt gasp from the other man, even as he hated himself for the deliberate cruelty of his words.

Twisting the cap off his beer, he threw himself down on the sofa in front of the TV, and, grabbing the remote, began to surf the channels for something marginally interesting to watch. Nursing his self-pity, he studiously ignored the soft sob and almost silent footsteps as Blair shuffled over to the French doors, not even turning when he heard the young man's slight struggle to prise the doors open with the fingertips of his heavily bandaged hands.

Only when the doors closed softly behind the devastated Guide did Jim turn to face the room and allow himself to listen to muffled sobs and smell the saline tang of fresh tears as Blair slumped on the futon, trying to stifle his crying with a pillow.

Right then, Jim thought he couldn't have hated himself more. Beset by guilt over the accident, even knowing he was hurting his Guide with his coldness, yet he couldn't bring himself to go and offer comfort to Blair in case he should be rebuffed, as he didn't think he could take that amount of pain.

He forced himself to replay the scene in his father's office again, seeing himself throw Blair aside as if he was no more than an irritating nuisance standing between himself and his prey. Remembering vividly the crash of smashing glass, the cry of pain and the scent of his Guide's blood, he came close to hurling the beer bottle against the wall in self-disgust. Breathing heavily in an effort to contain his emotional turmoil, he sat back against the sofa cushions and forced himself to watch the mindless drivel on the TV although he didn't take in a single word.

Meanwhile, in the office, Blair finally managed to contain his sobs, although tears still leaked obstinately from beneath his eyelids. He was desperately worried about upsetting and angering his Sentinel, who was, and always would be, the centre of his universe.

However, the unforeseen violence of the incident had shocked him to his very core, reigniting his fears and memories of pain inflicted by big, angry men in contrast to the love and gentleness he had become accustomed to receiving from Jim.

Yes, certainly he'd seen Jim mad, with criminals, fellow cops and even with Blair himself a couple of times, reacting with anger arising from concern when he thought that Blair had endangered himself unnecessarily. But he had never done more than shout at him and given him a shake, and had certainly never thrown him aside like an unwanted hindrance.

His head was telling him that this was just an unfortunate accident caused by the furious Sentinel's instinctive reaction to an implied threat to both himself and his Guide, and certainly not aimed at hurting Blair, but rather keeping him out of harm's way. However, it had backfired dramatically insofar as Jim had completely ignored Blair's attempts to do his job as Guide and moderating influence to the detriment of their partnership and causing Blair to be injured anyway.

Blair's heart therefore chose to ignore the rational, common sense argument in favour of retreating in the face of the hateful demons which were trying to cast Jim in the same mould as past abusers in Blair's memories. Cringing internally at the remembered pain and humiliation, Blair was forced to confront the fact that he was once again afraid of being pressured in terms of sexual activity, which would obviously be a potentially devastating problem to the Sentinel / Guide bonding process that was so vital to them both.

The combination of pain, stress and emotional confusion built inexorably in the Guide's mind until the threat of empathic overload became increasingly likely, so that Blair knew that he would soon need to seek help. Despite his reluctance, he was forced to creep out of the illusory shelter of the office and move fearfully towards where Jim sat like a statue in front of the TV, still clutching the beer bottle and in a light zone brought on by his own disturbed thoughts and the over-stretching of his senses to monitor his Guide's every movement and murmur.

Worrying his lip between his teeth until it bled slightly, Blair sank silently down to crouch at Jim's feet, gradually pressing closer to his Sentinel's leg until his forehead and one bandaged hand rested on Jim's thigh. He was incredibly relieved when, rather than being shoved away in disgust, a gentle hand came to rest on his head, and long fingers carded through his curls. Although neither spoke, they stayed in place for an hour or so, gradually re-establishing their shared link, giving and receiving comfort, and trying to regain a sense of equilibrium.

Eventually, however, being fully tuned in to every nuance of his Guide's physical state, Jim knew instantly when the young man was beginning to grow stiff and cramped in his half-sitting, half-

kneeling huddle on the floor, so he broke the silence by saying, "Come on, baby, I can feel you stiffening up. Let's get you into a more comfortable position, shall we?"

When Blair raised his head to look into Jim's face, Jim was filled with love and no little remorse as he studied the solemn expression on the attractive features, noting the beautiful blue eyes large and dark with emotion, and lips red and slightly swollen where Blair had bitten them in his nervousness.

When Blair nodded slightly, Jim reached down and, keeping his movements slow and gentle, just as he had when he'd first brought Blair home, took hold of the smaller man's arms just above the elbows. Relieved when the young Guide didn't cringe in response, he turned the slender body to sit in his lap; the curly head tucked into the crease of Jim's neck and shoulder and the injured hands resting in Blair's lap. Wrapping one arm around Blair's body in a comforting embrace, he gently took the young man's bandaged hands in his free hand.

"Comfortable, baby?" he whispered. Blair nodded again, relaxing incrementally into the embrace and allowing his taut muscles to loosen and rest.

A few minutes later, he whispered nervously, "Jim, can I talk about what happened? Please? I really need to tell you what I feel, but I'm scared I'll make you mad at me again. Please can you just listen and not be mad?"

Stabbed through the heart by a barb of bitter pain at his Guide's passionate plea, Jim just nodded, determinedly strengthening his resolve to listen to Blair without a negative reaction, and tightening his hold fractionally to encourage Blair to continue.

Glancing up quickly to gauge his Sentinel's true state of mind and 'reading' him to discover self-directed guilt and understanding rather than disgust and anger, he began, after tucking his head back into Jim's broad shoulder.

"I'm sorry, man. I really shouldn't be acting like such a wimp. I *do* understand what happened. You were reacting as a primal Alpha Sentinel to neutralise a potential threat to you and your Guide...but Jim...you didn't let me do *my* job. I'm supposed to guide you: help you contain and control your senses and reactions so you don't end up doing something that could land you in jail. It might not have mattered so much in pre-industrialised societies, but in the 21st century, even Sentinels get prosecuted under present legislation! I only wanted to stop you from hurting –; perhaps killing –; your own father!

"When you threw me away like that, I couldn't help but remember how Galbini and his friends used to do that. They'd use me then throw me aside like a piece of used, dirty trash!

"I'm sorry man, truly, but it brought back all those fears..."

Here Blair trailed off, exhausted both at the lengthy speech and the weight of emotions behind it. Without the energy to argue or defend himself further, he resigned himself to his fate, insofar as it would be dictated by Jim's response.

Jim, although hardly surprised by his Guide's confession and aware of his state of mind, was sincerely upset –; mortified even –; that a thoughtless, instinctive reaction of his could have wreaked so much havoc. Deeply troubled, and never a particularly verbose personality at the best of times, he struggled with how to begin to explain his thought processes to the beloved, but now undeniably anxious young man cuddled to his chest.

Finally deciding that all he could do was respond with the same candour and direct honesty that Blair had granted to him, he tried to organise his reply accordingly.

"I'm sorry, baby. I scarcely know how to begin. It seems to me that whatever I say, it's going to sound trite and unconvincing, even though I want to be completely sincere. You already know by now that I'm not that good with words. That's your department, babe, so I'm just going to do my best here and let you 'read' my sincerity.

"Firstly, I need to say how very sorry I am that you got hurt. I would NEVER lift a hand to you intentionally, kiddo. I can't really even describe what I was feeling back then –; the fury was so intense that nothing and no one could have stopped me for a few moments. But surely, sweetheart, it must mean *something* about the strength of our partnership that I stopped short the instant you cried out? I know very well that you should never have been hurt, but you *did* stop me anyway. Getting to grips with my miserable, evil-minded father was never going to take precedence over going to help you, lover.

"I'm just praying here that, if you're willing to stick with me, and as our bond deepens further, I'm going to react to you immediately rather than wait for it to take an injury to you to make me stop. Can we start over, Chief? I need to know that you're not so frightened of me that we'll never regain our true bond."

Aware that silent tears were once more dampening his scrub top, he reined in his impatience to listen for his Guide's response.

A few moments later, after taking a deep calming breath, Blair whispered, "Thank you for explaining everything to me Jim. I think I can understand and accept what you mean, and I would never give up on us. I can't –; it's just not possible. All I ask is that you give me a bit more time. I'm sorry to ask it –; it shouldn't be necessary –; but I'd be lying to you if I said it didn't matter to me. It did, and I'm a bit shaky. But I'll always love you, Jim. It's a given. You're my Sentinel, and you saved me, and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to show you how much that means to me. I'll try to get over this quickly, I promise! Please say the words –; please tell me you feel the same!"

Jim's heart-felt response was immediate, as was the surge of love and gratitude that he sent through their link.

"Always, babe. My Guide, forever. Nothing will *ever* change that, lover. Nothing!"

Later that evening, after both men had managed a few bites of the light supper Jim threw together, they retired to the bathroom where Jim matter-of-factly took care of many of the more intimate actions his Guide couldn't manage with his heavily bandaged hands. Well aware of his partner's shy embarrassment, he deliberately refrained from prolonging the necessary duties any more than he had to. Having covered the injured limbs in plastic wrap, Jim steered his tired and rather despondent young partner to the shower, where he completed their mutual clean up in as quick and straightforward a manner as possible, easily discerning his Guide's barely disguised relief. However, he resolutely refused to take umbrage, knowing how hard it was for Blair to try and control his fear responses, and concentrated instead on sending soothing and supportive thoughts through their link as he gently patted the younger man dry with a large, fluffy towel.

Finally returning to their large bed, he was grateful when Blair immediately accepted his offer of a cuddle, quickly settling himself into his customary position half-lying on Jim's long body, and falling asleep almost as soon as his head came to rest on Jim's shoulder.

Jim simply lay for a while, quietly holding the beloved body in his arms, and thanking TPTB that, despite his potentially disastrous actions, his Guide was still prepared to work with him to repair the damage done to their bond. He couldn't even find it in him to feel any resentment, even if it meant virtually going back to square one in sexual terms in order to rebuild Blair's confidence in his Sentinel, and in said Sentinel's intentions. Blair had forgiven him freely, and had confirmed his commitment to their partnership, and for now that was all Jim needed to know.

After a fairly restful night, Jim awoke early to see that Blair was still deeply asleep, so he carefully extricated himself from under the smaller figure blanketing him, and slid out of bed to make use of the bathroom and put on fresh coffee.

Taking the opportunity to call Simon while Blair slept on, he caught up on the situation regarding William, learning that his father had barely arrived at the PD before his high-priced lawyer swept in and secured his release on the grounds that there was nothing more than circumstantial evidence and hearsay backing the charge of plotting against Blair. The student involved, and the middle man William used to approach her both claimed that they had never known who was behind the offer. All they had was William's angry 'confession' shouted during

his furious outburst in his office in Jim and the others' presence, which was unusable as Ellison Senior hadn't been cautioned.

Between them they agreed that Jim and Blair should come in later that morning to discuss the issue further, and that a different approach should be taken, one which might well involve confronting Chancellor Edwards.

Hearing Blair stirring above him, Jim terminated the call and trotted up the stairs to see a tousled head peer up at him from his nest of pillows and comforter.

Jim smiled gently at the charming sight, and held out a hand, hoping to encourage his Guide to come to him for a hug. He was pleased and not a little relieved when Blair smiled shyly back at him and held out a bandaged hand for him to take. Gripping his lover's forearm carefully, not wanting to hurt the cut appendage any further, Jim eased the smaller body into his arms for a comforting few minutes' cuddling before pulling gently away.

"Ready for a quick shower, sweetheart?" he asked hopefully. "I'll wrap your hands in plastic again, but then I'd like to put something less bulky on them so you can at least wiggle your fingers. Sound OK to you?"

"Yes, please, Jim," came the quiet response. "I'd like to be able to do at least a bit for myself. I mean, I know I can't do much, and I promise not to overdo it and pull the stitches, but I feel like I'm wearing boxing gloves!"

Jim was delighted by his young partner's gentle attempt at humour, and, smiling in appreciation, he helped Blair down to the bathroom to do what was necessary to make Blair feel more comfortable.

A short while later, Blair was clean and dressed and feeling a little less handicapped with the fresh dressings and expertly applied support bandages which Jim had used to replace the thick original ones in order to expose all his fingers while still protecting the stitched cuts to his palms.

After a light breakfast, Blair declared himself ready to go in to the PD, with only a trace of a quaver in his voice betraying his unease. It would probably have gone unnoticed to *mundane* ears, but came over loud and clear to his Sentinel, who was well aware of his Guide's inner conflict. Under the circumstances, Jim could only applaud the younger man's courage.

When the pair arrived at the MCU bullpen, Blair was once more in his customary place tucked snugly against Jim's side, to all outward appearances completely normal if it wasn't for the white bandages covering the young man's hands.

Megan flew over to them from her desk, and totally ignoring Jim's scowl of indignation as usual, hugged Blair gently before placing both hands on his shoulders to look intently down into his face.

"Sandy, love, are you really OK? We've all heard about what happened, but not how badly you were hurt. Your hands will heal completely, won't they?"

Blair would have liked to duck his head down in embarrassment at the unsolicited attention, but he knew that it would hurt the kind-hearted Aussie Inspector's feelings. He therefore forced himself look up into the concerned face and offered Megan a tiny smile before saying, "I'm all right, really. They're only cuts -; no real damage done. The stitches won't be in for long and--"

Just then Joel appeared, interrupting Blair's halting explanation and preventing any further comment from Megan by turning the small Guide towards him and engulfing him in a careful but thorough hug.

On their way past the group, H and Rafe also ruffled Blair's hair and gave him friendly pats on the shoulder, while Jim looked on with a fond and indulgent smile on his face.

While the expressions of comfort and concern continued, he pondered again on how people seemed to like to touch and hold Blair. He wondered if it was a 'Guide' thing or simply a 'Blair' thing that drew so many to his gentle partner.

His smile thinned a little when he also considered the downside to this apparent compulsion to have physical contact with the beautiful empath. Not everyone had the best reasons for wanting to possess the young man; witness Galbini and Kobayoshi and their sadistic and sleazy henchmen.

Swiftly shutting down that line of thought before his irritation could upset Blair, his smile widened again when he saw Rhonda approaching. Having noted their arrival and reception, the attractive secretary exited her office with her usual offering of a cup of hot chocolate and a paper plate bearing two chocolate chip cookies which she carefully placed on Blair's desk before cupping the young man's scarlet face in her cool hands and dropping a kiss on his forehead.

"I'm so glad you're all right, Blair! Enjoy your chocolate, dear." And, smiling benignly at Blair's stammered thanks, she swept regally back towards her office.

Just then, Simon entered the bullpen, and, seeing Jim and Blair, asked them to come to his office. "You can bring your chocolate with you, son," he added with a grin. "I wouldn't want to upset Rhonda by depriving you of her gift! Not if I want my paperwork done expeditiously, anyway."

Since Blair didn't have the grip yet to enable him to carry anything, Jim obligingly picked up the drink and cookie plate and followed his Guide to the Captain's office, where he set them down on the desk within easy reach of Blair's chair.

After a few minutes' of small talk, where they caught Simon up on the extent of Blair's injuries, and Blair ate one of the cookies and drank his chocolate while Simon and Jim savoured some of the Captain's gourmet coffee, Simon brought the subject round to other possible lines of enquiry into the alleged plot to implicate Blair.

"I hate to have to say it, Jim," he said, "but I can't see how we're going to be able to charge your father, even if he is the most likely suspect. Like his lawyer said, there's no real evidence against him. Sentinel Kelly might have heard Edwards' phone call, and might have traced it to your father's office, but she couldn't positively ID the voice on the other end of the line at the time. In retrospect, and having now heard your father speak, she's almost certain that it was him, but it's too open to question if a really sharp defence attorney was to press the issue and sway an impressionable jury to think there was reasonable doubt, sentinel senses notwithstanding.

"Again, although the student 'fessed up quickly enough, according to sentinel interrogation results she really didn't know who was behind the whole thing, and the middle man isn't saying anything. He's most likely one of your father's employees, and would rather take the rap and a good payoff rather than shop his benefactor.

"So, since your father's statements are inadmissible as evidence, I'm thinking that the next step has to be confronting Chancellor Edwards herself, in which case I really can't let you be the one to do it, Jim, unless you can promise me faithfully that you won't try to rip her head off!"

Simon's wry expression made it clear that he wasn't joking, and Jim knew he had to tread carefully.

Tightly reining in his anger, and knowing that any loss of control now would only confirm Simon's fears regarding his unsuitability for conducting the Edwards interview, Jim looked his Captain directly in the eyes and said, "I get what you're saying, Simon, and after the last episode, it's quite understandable that you should be concerned that I can't control myself. I have to tell you, though, that I want in on this case. I want it real bad, for Blair's sake and for my own. I give you my solemn oath that I won't overreact again. It's more than my life and my sanity's worth to have Blair frightened of me again, any more than he is now. Our partnership is too important for me to risk damaging it further with another outburst."

With that, he gently took Blair's hand in his own and looked into the wide blue eyes.

"Do I have your backing in this, Chief? I need to know if you don't think you can trust me not to get mad again."

Swallowing hard, Blair paused for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, Jim, I trust you. I believe that you won't do anything that might hurt me again. As long as we face her together, I won't be afraid."

Smiling widely at this affirmation of love and trust from his beloved Guide, Jim turned back to face Simon. "Is that enough for you, Simon? Can you let us do this? I'd be more than happy for another pair to go along for the ride –; perhaps Kelly and Carlson will want to follow up on this anyway. What do you say?"

Leaning his elbows on his desk and resting his chin on steepled fingers, Simon contemplated his Sentinel Detective for long moments, before switching his gaze to Blair. Although he swallowed nervously at the attention, the younger man returned Simon's look with an earnest one of his own, and was rewarded when the captain nodded briskly. However, the big man still didn't exactly look 100% convinced of the rightness of his own decision when he replied.

"OK, gentlemen, go and do the interview. But know that I'm sticking my neck out on this one, so don't let me down. Common sense tells me that in most folks' opinion –; especially the PD's – you're really too close to this case for objectivity, but I know how much it means to you. To you both.

"But Kelly and Carlson take the lead, OK? What they say, goes, and if you can't handle that, it's no deal!"

"Thanks, Simon. I really appreciate this," Jim replied warmly in overt relief. Then, turning to his rather bemused partner he said, "Come on, Chief, let's go and beard the Chancellor in her den!"

After checking with Mary Kelly and her Guide, and getting their enthusiastic affirmative response, Jim and Blair set out for Rainier University, where they met up with the other Sentinel / Guide pair as arranged. Blair directed them to the Chancellor's office, where the middle-aged secretary at the front desk looked up inquisitively at the group, only to break into a wide smile when she recognised Blair.

"Hello, Blair, dear," she said warmly. "How're you doing? I heard about what that Turner girl said about you, and I have to tell you that I don't believe a word of it! Neither does anyone else who knows you, dear. I hope you're coming back soon?"

Smiling shyly with pleasure at the older woman's words, Blair thanked her, saying that he hoped to be back next term, all being well.

Not wanting to break in on the exchange, but needing to get the visit underway, Jim asked to see the Chancellor.

"Well, she usually won't see anyone without an appointment, but, seeing as it's police business, I think you should go right in. Good luck, dear," she finished, addressing Blair again and offering him an encouraging smile.

"Thank you, Marjorie," replied Blair softly, then turned to enter the inner office, tucked close to Jim's side, and followed by the other team.

Marie Edwards looked up in surprise, which changed rapidly to anger and disgust when she saw who her visitors were. Straightening her smart suit jacket, she glared at Blair before saying, "What is the meaning of this? Why is that creature here and not sitting in a cell somewhere?"

Stopping in front of the wide desk, arm comfortably wrapped round his Guide's shoulders in support, Jim simply stared speculatively at the woman for long moments, eyes cold and hard, until she squirmed slightly in her chair.

"Chancellor Edwards," he began with icy politeness. "My colleagues and I are here to investigate a particularly unpleasant attempt to damage my Guide's reputation. Although there is no doubt of his complete innocence, I can and will get to the bottom of this nasty little plot, and, when I do, the perpetrators will not like what will happen."

"Are you threatening me?" gasped the Chancellor, trying valiantly to hide her worry.

"Are you confessing to something?" came the cold response.

"No, no, not at all!" she stuttered angrily. "What makes you think I know anything? As far as I'm concerned, that young man behaved reprehensibly, and was treated accordingly."

Just then the door opened to reveal the Dean, who had been advised of the detectives' visit by Edwards' secretary.

"Sentinel Detective Ellison, Guide Sandburg," he said smoothly, also nodding politely to the other pair in greeting. "I understand you are here regarding the dismissal of Guide Sandburg for alleged unethical conduct? I have recently been advised by Director Kingsley, an old friend of mine, that there is some question of the complicity of certain members of Rainier staff in the case. Perhaps you can enlighten me as to your suspicions?"

Rubbing Blair's arm in comfort as he felt the young man shiver slightly, Jim inclined his head courteously to the Dean before saying, "We have reason to believe that Chancellor Edwards may have been approached by my father, William Ellison of Ellison Enterprises. We know that she placed a phone call to my father's office –; Sentinel Kelly here could hear her –; and we also understand that my father made her an offer of donating enough money for new sports facilities in payment for helping to implicate my Guide. My father has admitted as much in our hearing. We are here to see what she has to say."

All eyes turned to the woman seated behind the desk, whose haughty demeanour was rapidly changing to one of surly defensiveness.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she blustered. "I know absolutely nothing about a so-called 'plot'! All I shall say is that when that young woman, Melanie Turner, came to me in obvious distress because of what *he* did" –; this said, pointing at Blair –; "I had no choice but to call the police!"

"You should know, Chancellor, that the student in question has confessed to her part in the 'plot'! She was apparently well known for her monetary problems, and was happy to take a bribe to accuse my Guide of indecent assault. The man who approached her has also confessed. That just leaves you and my father...." Here Jim tailed off, deliberately loading his tone and expression with an implied certainty of her guilt.

Mary Kelly, playing along, smiled knowingly at the dismayed woman, while Stewart Carlson adopted a smug smirk, and raised his eyebrow in a tacit invitation to hear her reply.

As for the Dean, he looked at his colleague with a frown of displeasure.

"What do you have to say Marie? Is this true? Is that really the source of the financial backing behind the new sports complex you've been so proud to tell me all about?"

Now squirming visibly in discomfort, Marie Edwards realised that there was no longer any point in trying to maintain her innocence. Sentinel senses would easily pick up on her attempts to bluff her way out of trouble, and as far as the Dean was concerned, she knew with a sinking feeling that her days at Rainier were numbered. Stiffening her spine, she decided that, if she was going down, she wasn't going to go alone. She was going to take that smooth-talking bastard William Ellison down with her.

Lifting her chin in bravado, she looked from one person to another, finishing with Jim, whom she addressed directly.

"All right. I admit it. Your father came to me with an offer to donate a substantial sum for my proposed sports complex if I would help him get your *Guide* dismissed. He said he wanted you to break the bond with that creature and come back to work with him, so he could groom you as the next CEO of Ellison Enterprises. He said that he knew plenty of proper Guides you could choose from who would be acceptable in polite society. All I had to do was to wait while he set the whole thing up, and then react convincingly when the police arrived. Are you satisfied now?" she finished defiantly.

Jim stared at her a while longer, then, without another word, he nodded decisively once, then turned and left the office, still holding Blair close to him, and leaving Kelly and Carlson to tie up the loose ends.

The pair left the building, still maintaining their silence, until they reached the truck, where Jim turned and hugged Blair to him, pressing a kiss to the top of the curly head.

"I'm so sorry you had to hear that, babe," he said softly. "I know how badly you feel about coming between me and my Dad, but I don't want you to feel that way anymore. What that man has done –; what he *wanted* to do to us –; I can never forgive him for. I can't even say that I hate him. It's too strong for that –; too deep. I just know that I never want to lay eyes on him again, ever!"

"Oh Jim," replied Blair, tears of sympathy beginning to well up in his eyes, and his expressive face full of love and concern. "I don't care about myself, really. But I'm so very sorry he could do that to you. If I'd ever known my father, I don't know what I would do –; how I would feel – if he tried to do to me what your Dad tried on you. I can't understand that sort of thinking at all!"

"It's OK, Chief. Unfortunately I *do* understand it. To that man, business acumen and social acceptance are all-important. Family is simply a means to an end, cementing the Ellison Empire together. He may never get formally accused of what he tried to do to you, sweetheart, but a far worse punishment will be loss of face in the public eye, and his failure to entice the prodigal son back to the fold. That's something he'll always regret!"

Epilogue:

Some days later, the partners were enjoying a well-deserved day off after following up several leads in another case which had led to the criminal's arrest.

Blair had had his stitches removed that morning, and Dr Stevens professed himself to be happy with the young man's recovery.

"The cuts have healed very well, Blair, and shouldn't scar much at all. Just keep a light dressing on them for now, and no soaking them in the tub until they're completely healed. You'll have to be careful for a while longer, as your palms will be tender to touch, but all in all they're coming along nicely."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Blair with a happy smile. "Jim is helping me a lot still with some things, but I can do more and more now."

"Yes, Chief," agreed his Sentinel with a grin. "But I'm going to be really glad when he's OK to cook again, Dr Stevens. I'm getting fed up with my efforts, and he does it so much better!"

Blushing at the praise, Blair looked up at Jim in adoration, and got a gentle hug and ruffling of his curls in response.

"Go on with you, you're making me blush too!" said Dr Stevens, smiling benignly at the pair. "Take care, and I don't want to see either of you in here for a loooooong time, except for social visits!"

Waving goodbye to the doctor and staff, Jim and Blair left the hospital, arms around each others' waists, and drove back to the loft in companionable silence, just exchanging smiling glances every so often.

On arriving back at the loft, they sat together on the sofa for a while, simply enjoying each other's love and comfort through their mental link, until Jim gently eased Blair to lie down with his head on a pillow on Jim's lap. Jim had discovered some time ago how relaxing it was for him to be able to run his hands through Blair's curls, and Blair had admitted that he loved the soothing touch also, so they often ended up in this position.

Blair had worked hard to put aside his earlier fears, and was in tune with his Sentinel once again for the most part, getting his confidence back a little more each day. He hadn't returned to Rainier yet, having decided that he might as well wait until the summer break was over, and starting afresh.

"Penny for them, sweetheart," murmured Jim, massaging the scalp beneath the soft curls.

"It's not much, really," replied the younger man, turning slightly more onto his back so he could look up at Jim's face.

"I was just thinking about going back to Rainier in the Fall. It's going to be strange with a new Chancellor."

"I suspect it'll be a change for the better, love," mused Jim, recommencing his playing with Blair's hair. "This one'll have to work pretty hard to repair the damage that Edwards caused to the University's rep."

Nodding in agreement, Blair replied thoughtfully, "I must admit I never really believed the Dean would dismiss her. It seems so strange that he should take my word over hers."

"That's where you're mistaken, love. It's not strange at all for anyone who gets to know you. You're probably the most honest person I've ever met!"

"Thanks Jim. That's so good of you to say, even if I have trouble believing it. I do feel sorry for Melanie, though."

"Can't see why myself, Chief. You're way too forgiving, not pressing charges."

"Yes, but Jim, it must be punishment enough for her to get sent down from Rainier. She'll never be taken seriously at a university again, once her reputation becomes known."

"If you say so, Chief. I still think she'd damned lucky that you're as good a person as you are. Most folks would have hung her out to dry for what she almost did."

As it turned out, the fallout of the 'Blair-plot' as Jim and Blair had facetiously named it, had led to several expected results, namely Chancellor Edwards' dismissal, Melanie Turner's being sent

down, and the 'middle man' turning out to be one of William's employees as they had thought. He had indeed taken the rap for his role in the set-up, willingly protecting his employer's identity as he knew that William Ellison had already transferred a substantial sum of 'hush money' into a foreign bank account for him.

What had been unexpected, except perhaps for Jim, was William's sudden decision to step down from his CEO's position, and his temporary withdrawal from the social scene.

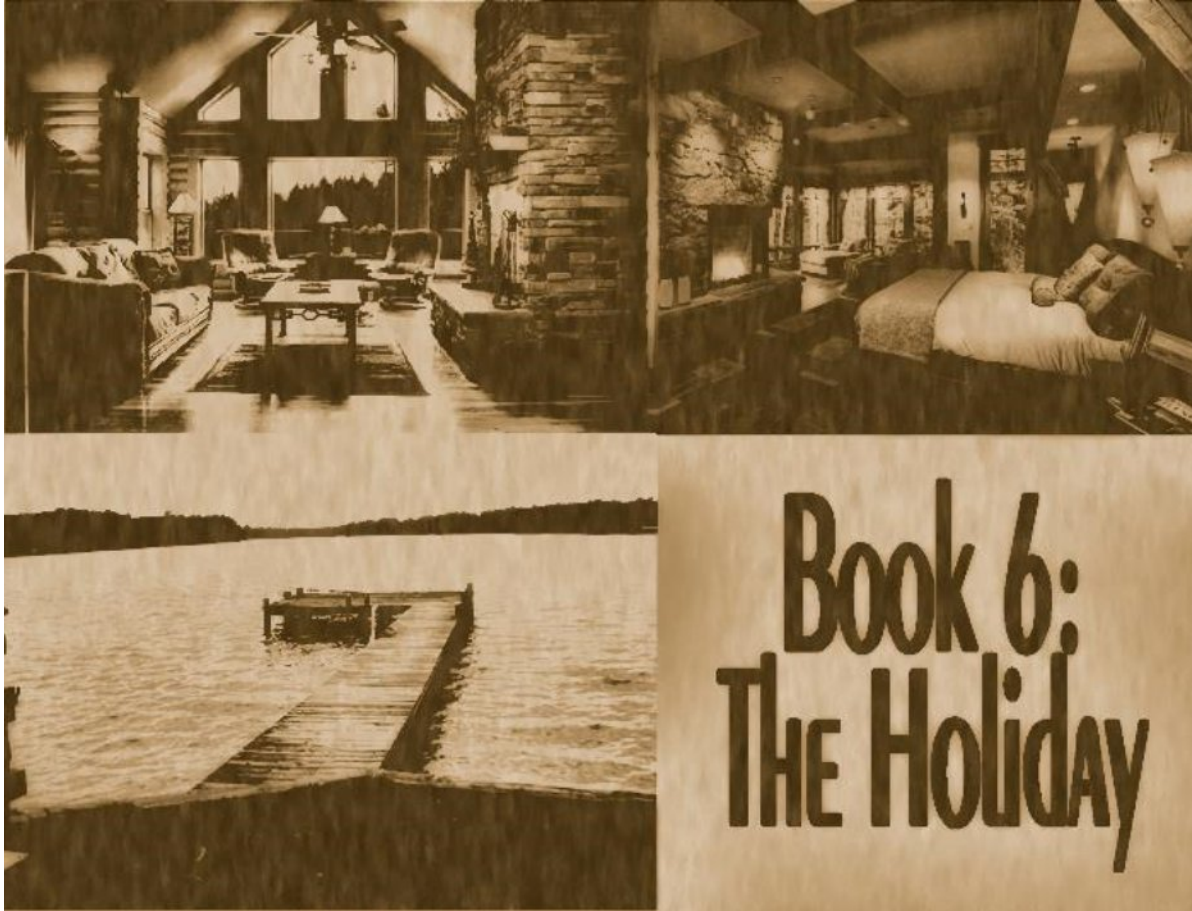
Unwilling to face the shame of his actions, ironically more because they had failed so abysmally rather than from the nature of the actions themselves; he turned his back on potential sneers from erstwhile business colleagues and society folks for the time being until the affair had faded from public interest, and installed a bemused but highly appreciative Steven to the post of CEO in his stead.

This development had pleased Jim immensely, as it seemed to signify the end of his father's attempts to lure him back, and gave his younger brother the position and prestige he rightly deserved after all his years of working for his father and trying to meet every demand the older man had made on him, reasonable or otherwise.

As for Jim and Blair, they were looking forward to a two week holiday in less than a month's time, Jim having found a cabin near Lake Chelan where he was determined to treat his Guide to a lot of TLC and some serious bonding. Blair was really excited about it, having confessed to Jim that, although he had travelled widely in his childhood, he had never had what you could call a real holiday. Even as a student, he had only been on anthropological expeditions when he could get a grant, so the thought of spending two whole weeks being cared for by his Sentinel pleased him no end.

With that thought uppermost in his mind he smiled up at Jim, face full of love and, knowing that it would please his lover greatly, he whispered, "Make love to me Jim?"

He wasn't wrong in his assumption, and he wasn't disappointed.



The Holiday

Jim Ellison looked over at the young man sitting beside him in the truck's passenger seat with fond exasperation. It seemed like the further they drew away from Cascade, the more excited and talkative his young Guide became, until he was certain that any time now, Blair would start with, "Are we nearly there yet?"

Smiling to himself, he gave himself a quick high five to see the positive results of his planning, and briefly thought about the previous few weeks, and the circumstances leading up to this trip.

Previously:

About three weeks previously, just before Rainier University's long summer break, Blair had fallen victim to Jim's father William Ellison's machinations in an attempt by the older Ellison to break Jim's bond with an 'unsuitable nobody' of a Guide, and win him back to his 'rightful' place on the Board of Ellison Enterprises. Needless to say, the plot had been foiled, but not

before Blair had been accidentally injured at his Sentinel's own hands –; an incident which had filled Jim with guilt and self-loathing –; but over the intervening weeks the pair had worked through their feelings and fought hard to re-establish their mutual love and respect.

Jim was filled with awe and love at his young Guide's courage and resilience, particularly in view of his traumatic recent past, and the depths of Blair's adoration and commitment never failed to humble him and make him all the more determined to cherish and protect the young man to the fullest extent of his ability.

As Blair's injured hands had healed, and the pair had slowly recovered their equilibrium, Jim had thrilled the young man by planning a proper two week holiday for them, seeing as he had plenty of leave accumulated, and with the blessing of their Captain, Simon Banks.

After a rocky start, Simon had come to appreciate the new Guide's value, both as Jim's partner, and also as the Major Crimes Unit's unofficial mascot. Although totally unaware of his role, said 'mascot' had quite unwittingly proved to be of immense value both as a morale booster, and also as a focus which drew the whole department closer together as a tight and smoothly functioning team, deeply protective of their own Sentinel / Guide pair. However, Jim was well aware that should he, or any other member of MCU, try to explain the phenomenon to Blair, the young man would simply have blushed in confusion and denied the assertion, being completely unable to comprehend a situation where he could be of importance to anyone, except, maybe, to his Sentinel on occasions when they were out in the field.

Jim recalled Blair's astonished and joyful reaction when he explained how, with the help of his brother Steven – now unexpectedly the new CEO of Ellison Enterprises – he had found a great cabin on the shores of Lake Chelan which he had been able to rent at minimum cost for two weeks. Although it should only be a drive of 3 hours or so from Cascade, he proposed that they take their time over the road trip, taking a much more 'scenic' route and stopping overnight on the way. His idea was for them both to basically chill out, soak up the peace and quiet of the spectacular scenery and enjoy any available activity as the mood took them.

Once there, however, Jim fondly hoped that they would be indulging in plenty of fishing, since the Manson Bay area was well known for trout and bass, and he looked forward to teaching his young partner the finer points of angling.

Blair's beautiful eyes had grown wide with wonder as Jim had drawn him down onto the sofa, arranging the slender body on his lap as he outlined the plans for the trip, punctuating his sentences with nibbles to the curl-covered ear and any areas of tempting throat which were in range of his questing mouth.

As he finished speaking, Blair had pulled away a little to look into his Sentinel's face, and Jim had smiled to see the emotions chasing one another across the expressive face. Awe and amazement swiftly followed by blinding happiness were written large, and Blair's eyes had grown shiny with unshed tears of joy before he had thrown both arms around Jim's neck,

crying, "Oh Jim, thank you, thank you! Love you so much! It'll be wonderful, I know it! A whole two weeks away together...I can't believe it!"

Although more than happy with his lover's ecstatic reaction, Jim had been a little bemused that such a simple thing as a shared holiday could cause so much excitement until Blair had explained that it would be the first real holiday he had ever had. Although he and Naomi had travelled widely to many interesting places in his globe-trotting youth, they had never indulged in an actual 'holiday', as everywhere they had landed up had simply been another stop in his Mom's endless quest for spiritual enlightenment, or else the latest in her apparently insatiable search for love (without commitment, of course).

Even in places as diverse as Big Sur or Tibet, there was never any opportunity to simply relax and enjoy, since the basic necessities of settling in to yet another temporary lifestyle took priority, and Blair had always had to struggle to find time to juggle his share of chores at the same time as soaking up as much cultural information as possible and trying to take full advantage of any intermittent opportunities for schooling should they come his way.

Fighting hard not to let his negative emotions spoil Blair's happiness, Jim found himself once again filled with anger at Naomi's thoughtless and self-centred lifestyle and its effects on her beautiful son, even if Blair persisted in claiming that it had been a good childhood, filled with the opportunity of seeing more of the world in a few short years than most people got to see in a whole lifetime.

Knowing that they would have to agree to disagree on the subject of Blair's Mom, Jim had simply smiled again and cuddled his lover close until grumbling tummies had indicated that it was time for dinner.

The following weeks had flown by as the pair worked hard to clear Jim's outstanding case load at the PD, and Blair had managed to do a little more of his own work on his laptop once the stitches in his hands had been removed. He didn't go back to Rainier, though, having already decided to take a break until September. He concentrated instead on working on improving his manual dexterity, and also helping Jim type up his reports. That particular exercise proved to be good physical therapy in itself as well as being much appreciated by his Sentinel, who was still less than comfortable with, or even interested in, developing his own IT skills.

Finally, Friday dawned, and as lunchtime approached, Jim and Blair were winding up a last bit of paperwork before leaving the bullpen, having already agreed with Simon that they could finish early in order to get their preparations for the trip underway. Blair was growing more and more excited, positively glowing with happiness and eager anticipation as the morning wore on. He was completely unaware as to how his joy was affecting the rest of the unit as he smiled and

bounced while helping Jim (and anyone else who could get away with securing his amiable cooperation when Jim's attention was distracted).

Simon, who had been having a few minutes' conversation with Jim in his office before the Sentinel gathered up his Guide to leave, stopped in the doorway and smiled as he ushered Jim out, nodding and grinning at the scene before them.

Jim, following the direction of his glance, was filled with a warmth he could never remember feeling before his unconventional young guide had entered his life. Folding his arms over his chest, he smiled and stood alongside Simon for a few moments, watching the detectives present - Rafe, H, Joel and Megan amongst others, plus a few uniforms - who all seemed to almost orbit the shyly smiling young man in their midst, patting him when they were in range, and chatting and joking in a friendly manner while he cheerfully helped out with any odd tasks at their request.

The entire bullpen seemed to have taken on a lightness of spirit and optimism seldom witnessed at the end of a long and gruelling week, and the almost festive atmosphere was undoubtedly down to Jim's Guide.

Jim's smile widened even further as Rhonda, Simon's much-prized secretary, sailed out of her small side office clutching a file her boss had requested, only to make a small detour to where Blair was standing at a filing cabinet. She paused for a moment to have a friendly word and pat his cheek before leaving the blushing young man to make her way to Simon to hand over the file.

Simon's grin was huge as he took the papers, nodding his thanks to Rhonda as he slapped Jim amicably on the shoulder.

"Go on, Jim, take him home. You may as well get going. The kid's going to make his face ache with so much smiling! Go, enjoy your break!"

"Anything you say, sir!" replied Jim smartly. "Thanks Simon, Rhonda. See you in two weeks' time!"

So saying, he moved back towards his desk, gathering up an armful of happy Guide on his way, to make quick work of tidying up their shared workspace.

Tucking Blair snugly into his side, Jim strode to the doors, waving and calling out their cheerful goodbyes and leaving a trail of smiling farewells and cries of 'see you soon' in their wake.

Finally alone in the elevator, they rode down to the parking garage, Jim taking advantage of the privacy to indulge in a few gentle kisses which had the effect of quieting his excitedly bouncing Guide for a few minutes until they reached the truck, where, once seated in the passenger seat, Blair began to bounce again.

Thinking to himself that the youngster resembled nothing so much as an eager puppy, Jim knew that a year or so ago he would have been hard put to not snap irritably at such behaviour. Now, however, he simply grinned indulgently, and, reaching over to clamp a large hand on the nearest bouncing thigh he said laughingly, "Down boy! You're going to wear yourself out before we've even set off!"

Blair froze for a second, then, quickly realising that Jim was only joking, he relaxed instantly. Blushing slightly, he murmured contritely, "Sorry, man! I don't mean to be a pest. I'm just so excited...!"

"You don't say, babel!" came the laughing reply, as Jim was quick to reassure him. "I think we're both in for a great time, so it's fine to get into the holiday mood!"

He was rewarded with another beaming smile, and they set off for 852 Prospect to grab a quick shower and change of clothes before loading up the truck and heading east for the first part of their road trip.

Present:

As it was still early in the evening when they had finally set out, Jim was taking his time and endeavouring to take as many scenic detours as he could fit in before the gathering dark forced them to seek out a motel in which to spend the night.

Blair was enchanted with the views from the points his Sentinel chose to stop at *en route*, admitting that it had been a while since he had had the opportunity just to look and enjoy rather than rushing from one activity to another. He leaned back contentedly against Jim's broad chest, revelling in the strong arms encircling him and Jim's warm breath in his ear as he whispered sweet nothings or informative comments as appropriate.

Eventually, Jim pulled up in front of the office of a pleasant looking motel, leaving Blair in the truck as he went inside to book a double room for them. He knew that the young Guide was still apprehensive about meeting strangers, even though Blair was at pains to impress upon his Sentinel that it wasn't because he was worried or ashamed of their partnership. Jim, easily discerning his Guide's sincerity through their shared link, understood only too well that the reasons behind Blair's shyness were nearly all centred on the young empath's general lack of self-confidence. He therefore didn't push the issue, simply booking a room at the far end of the block, well away from the road and from prying eyes.

While in the office, he asked the pleasant young man at the desk about nearby restaurants, and was recommended to try a small, family-run place just a mile or so down the road which served hot meals until 9.30pm.

Seeing as it was 8.15pm already by the time they had parked up outside their room, Jim suggested that they settle in quickly and go out more or less immediately to make sure of securing a hot meal.

Happy to agree, Blair quickly made use of the small but scrupulously clean bathroom, and helped Jim put their small overnight bags in the closet.

Back in the truck again, they soon located the restaurant, which turned out to be a cottage style building, freshly painted in brown, green and cream to blend in with the surrounding forest scenery, and offering home-cooked meals prepared by the owner's wife while he and his daughter tended the bar and waited tables. Jim and Blair were pleasantly surprised by the cosy and informal interior, which, although fairly small, was well patronised even at the comparatively late hour. They were quickly shown to a small corner table where they could enjoy a modicum of privacy and also surreptitiously watch the folks in the rest of the dining room.

Ordering a beer for them both, Jim went for the home-made burger with everything, smirking at his Guide's slight frown of disapproval, while Blair chose the warm chicken salad.

While they waited for the meals to arrive, Jim picked up his beer and clinked it against Blair's as he proposed a toast of 'happy holidays'. His Guide giggled and smiled widely, thoroughly enjoying their first night of freedom, and approving of the small but overt indication of Jim's willingness to relax into the mood.

When the food arrived, they found it to be well-prepared, tasty and plentiful, so they tucked right in with gusto, pausing every so often to make appreciative comments. Not surprisingly, Jim inhaled his burger fairly quickly, so he sat back to watch Blair steadily work his way through the salad, smiling contentedly at the evidence of Blair's reawakened appetite. Although the young man still had a tendency to forget food when he was upset or stressed in any way, he had put on some much-needed weight under Jim's care, and was altogether healthier looking, even if his slender frame was never likely to be more than adequately well-covered.

The only thing that had the potential to spoil a good evening happened out of Blair's earshot, for which Jim was very glad.

Sentinel hearing was easily able to pick up on a whispered conversation taking place at a table in the opposite corner, where three men, obviously locals, were commenting none-too-sympathetically on the pair of strangers who had encroached on their 'turf'.

The youngest looking one, a scruffy, spotty and red-haired individual, snuck a quick glance in Jim and Blair's direction before hissing, "I'm tellin' you, they's queer! That big dude's just got to be the kid's 'Daddy'! They'd better not be staying hereabouts!"

An older guy, with greying, reddish hair and similar features which suggested that he was probably the other's father, replied, "Keep your voice down, Jess! They'll hear you! It ain't worth the bother if they's just passing through!"

The third man, a small, balding guy sporting thick-lensed spectacles and wearing faded dungarees, spotted Jim's glare in their direction and whispered urgently, "Shut up! The big guy can hear you!"

At the disbelieving glares of his companions, he added, "I'm telling you, he can hear you! I bet they's one of those Sentinel pairs we've been hearing so much about on the news! Shut up before he comes over. I don't care if they's fags, he looks mean!"

Dropping their gazes, all three concentrated on finishing their beers before settling the check and beating a hasty retreat, leaving the restaurant owner looking after them with a puzzled expression on his face.

Blair, who had been concentrating on his rather tasty chicken, suddenly felt a 'ping', like a 'disturbance in the Force' as he and Jim jokingly called it. Glancing up at Jim with an eyebrow raised in enquiry, he was reassured by his Sentinel's grin and affirmation that there was nothing wrong. Not having heard the conversation in question, Blair readily accepted Jim's word, while his Sentinel did an outstanding job of squashing his instinctive aggressive response, knowing that it would only upset Blair and taint the rest of the holiday.

Once the locals had left, Jim was able to relax his stance, certain now that there was no other threat to his Guide either in the restaurant or outside, and schooled himself to enjoy the rest of the evening.

Another beer each and two coffees later, Blair suddenly yawned widely, shooting an apologetic look at his Sentinel. Jim was already aware of the young man's exhaustion, and was merely amazed at how long his Guide had managed to actually stay alert considering all the bouncing he'd been doing that day.

"Time for bed, Junior!" he said with a smile, and tossing a more than adequate amount of bills on the table to cover the check, he steered his rapidly wilting lover out to the truck to return to the motel for a cuddle in a really quite comfortable queen-sized bed.

The following morning, Sentinel and Guide woke rested and refreshed, and ready to continue their trip to Lake Chelan, which was less than two hours away despite the 'scenic' detours.

After a leisurely shared shower, which both of them thoroughly enjoyed, they packed up the few items from their overnight bags and drove round to the office to settle up. With Blair remaining in the truck as usual, Jim entered the office to pay the bill, and also passed on his thanks for the dinner recommendation. The young receptionist smiled readily, and handed over

Jim's change, saying cheerfully, "No problem, man. Joe's is a real good local place, and I'm glad you enjoyed it. It's open for breakfast too, if you've a mind. Have a nice day, now!"

Taking advantage of the advice, Jim and Blair enjoyed a hearty breakfast which would set them up for the day, as Jim intended to take his time driving to the cabin.

As the cabin itself was in a secluded area served by local roads which were little more than tracks, he wanted to stop by the more populous places first in order to stock up on fresh produce so they wouldn't need to use the nearest town's general stores any more than necessary. He had been told that the cabin would have full amenities, and would have already have been stocked with basic provisions, but it was always an entertainment in itself doing food shopping with Blair. Jim was therefore perfectly happy to wander round the supermarket, watching the antics of his Guide who was definitely in hyper mode that morning.

A couple of hours later, Jim pulled up outside an impressive wooden cabin. Built in a large, secluded clearing in a forested area adjoining the beach, it was conveniently placed for the fishing grounds in the Manson area.

Blair's face was alight with amazement, and his jaw dropped at the first view of the 'cabin'. He turned his awe-struck gaze on his Sentinel as he murmured breathlessly, "And this is a CABIN? Gods, Jim, it's big enough to house three families!"

"Yeah, OK, kid –; it's fairly big, I'll grant you, but for Steven and his friends, this is a shack, believe me!"

Chuckling merrily, his Guide replied, "OK, Jim. I guess I ought to be really offended, and Naomi'd have a cow, but, you know what? I think it's great! And it's all ours for two weeks! I love you, man!"

Climbing out of the truck, both men stood back a little to admire the two-storey house which was built rustic-style out of solid timber. A short flight of steps led up to a veranda which obviously ran around the house, widening at the back to form a large deck which overlooked the lake and provided stunning scenic views.

Inside, the great room had a huge stone fireplace and comfortable, solid furnishings, and was adjoined by a 'kitchenette' which was twice the size of the one in the loft, and which also included a dining area with a great view of the lake through a large picture window.

Outside, they were pleased to find a large gas BBQ and several chairs and loungers from which they would be able to admire the sunsets from across the lake.

Having thoroughly explored the first floor, Blair ran upstairs to stop short at the door of what was obviously the master suite.

"Oh my! Jim, come look at this!" he whispered in hushed tones, taking in the scene before him with round eyes.

Coming up to stand behind him, Jim agreed, "It's quite something, Chief. I knew Steven's friends didn't exactly slum it out here in the wilds, but I could live with this sort of 'rusticity' permanently."

The bedroom itself was beautifully appointed and contained a huge king sized bed which was on a raised platform so that the occupants could take full advantage of the spectacular view from an enormous picture window which also opened out onto a sizable balcony. The adjoining *en suite* bathroom had a walk-in shower big enough for at least two persons, and a large corner whirlpool bath which had Jim's imagination running riot with thoughts of what he and Blair could get up to while using it.

A cursory check round the rest of the floor revealed another two comfortable guest bedrooms with an adjoining shared bathroom.

Thoroughly satisfied with their temporary accommodation, they went back down to unpack first the groceries and then their bags before grabbing a quick sandwich lunch.

After lunch they explored the large back lot which consisted of an acre or so of cleared woodland which stretched down to the lake's edge, and had been left as grass studded with wild flowers. A sturdy dock had been erected on the shoreline, and Jim grinned in delight to see a small motor boat berthed there, which would be perfect for fishing out on the lake.

Hugging his Guide to him, he said, "If you don't mind, Chief, I'd like to do a little fishing from the dock, as it's too good an opportunity to miss. I don't want to do much else today –; certainly not take the boat out, as we've had quite a busy day, and we've got plenty of time to organise other activities. Is there anything you'd like to do instead?"

"No, Jim, that's fine," replied his lover with a gentle smile. "I think I just want to read a bit, or get the laptop out and just sit out on the deck for a while. You go ahead and fish –; perhaps you can catch supper?"

"Don't know about that, baby, but I can try!" and with that they returned to the house where Jim collected his fishing gear, and Blair grabbed his backpack to get out some books and his beloved laptop.

Settling himself on the deck, Blair was thrilled to find that there was a wireless broadband connection despite the relatively isolated location, so he immediately began to surf for information about the Lake Chelan area, particularly fishing grounds and stores for Jim.

Jim smiled at the young man's enthusiastic discovery, thinking to himself that he wasn't surprised at the amenities available, since it was inconceivable that any of Steven's high-powered business friends would cut themselves off from the outside world even during vacation time.

A few hours later, Blair had finished his surfing and had fallen asleep in one of the comfortable loungers. Jim, having surprised himself by catching a decent sized trout in a reasonably short time, packed up his gear for now and took the fish back to show his lover before cleaning it ready for supper. He suspected that Blair would like to prepare their meal now his hands were better, as the young man loved to cook, and Jim was always appreciative of the tasty results.

Smiling at the sight that greeted him as he climbed up to the deck, Jim put down the fishing gear and took the trout through to the kitchen before returning to gently wake his Guide who was snuggled up fast asleep with his glasses askew on his nose, and a large notebook open and resting on his chest.

"Hey, babe," said Jim softly, gently shaking the young man's shoulder. "You ready for some supper? I did what you said and caught it for you!"

Blinking blearily up at him for a few seconds, Blair smiled and replied, "Really? Cool! Do you want me to cook it for us?"

Removing the glasses from his lover's nose, Jim leaned down to steal a kiss before replying, "I hoped you were going to say that, Chief. I'm kind of glad you're back to doing most of the cooking again. It's so much more interesting than the stuff I can be bothered to do. I'll do the clean-up, though!"

"Done!" Blair chortled with a cheeky grin. "One trout à la Sandburg coming up!" and he sat up to go to the kitchen, but not before indulging in a few minutes of mutually satisfying cuddling.

Later that evening, having enjoyed a simple but tasty meal of Blair's specially seasoned grilled trout with baked potatoes and salad, the two men retired to the deck with a beer apiece to watch the sunset over the lake. Pulling Blair down to share the large lounger, Jim cuddled the young man close to counter the slight chill that was coming off the water as the night drew in, knowing that his Guide was perennially susceptible to cold, even in Washington State summer evenings.

"End of a perfect day, eh, Chief?" murmured Jim, nibbling the tempting soft skin behind Blair's ear.

Shivering in pleasure rather than chill, Blair replied with a slight catch in his voice. "Yes, Jim. It's been everything I could have wanted, and it's only the first day! I've pulled up some information about fishing grounds and other activities for you, and there's plenty to see and do. Thank you so much for the idea, Jim. Love you so much...!"

Conversation became redundant after that, as Jim took advantage of his Guide's nearness to touch and stroke the pliant body in his arms until by mutual consent they were lured back

inside by the promise of greater warmth now the night-time temperature was falling fast. Quickly locking up the house for the night, they retired to the huge master bedroom.

Having gently removed Blair's clothing, Jim wrapped him in a fluffy robe before steering his partner towards the plush bathroom, where he began to run water into the enormous whirlpool tub. Stripping off his own clothes, he tested the water, then helped his smiling Guide into the tub, climbing in himself before switching on the bubbles.

"Ah, yes, this is the life!" he murmured, relaxing into the bubbling heat. "I could really get used to this decadence! How about you, baby? Or does this offend your sensitivities too?" he added, with a playful grin.

Smiling widely, Blair replied, "I know I really ought to dislike it...and like I said, Naomi would *not* be happy if she could see me now...but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't enjoying this. I've never been in one of these before. It's really relaxing, isn't it?"

"Sure is, and conveniently set up too..." replied Jim with a leer, and he tugged his unresisting Guide over to sit on his lap to continue where they left off on the lounge.

The next day dawned bright and clear, and Jim, waking early as was his custom, enjoyed the breathtaking view from the huge window. Looking down at his still deeply sleeping Guide, who was snuggled up close as usual, he smiled contentedly and relaxed again. There was no hurry to get up, and that meant that he could indulge himself freely in the luxury of being able to hold Blair's beloved body close and focus on the young man with all his senses such that he was fully grounded and every sense became ultra sharp and clear.

Protected from the risk of zoning by the input from his Guide's presence, he gazed out of the window and threw out his vision as far as he could, picking out the individual colours on the feathers of an eagle in the far distance, and watching a deer on the farther shore cautiously approaching the water's edge to take a drink.

At moments like these, he truly appreciated his gifts, and was equally grateful for the young man in his arms whose own empathy and guiding abilities enabled Jim to utilise his senses to their full potential.

As the change in the beloved heartbeat signalled that his Guide and lover was close to waking, Jim smiled down at the curly head tucked into his shoulder, and dropped a kiss on its crown.

"Hey, baby, did you sleep well?" he asked, even though he already knew that Blair's sleep had been deep and undisturbed following their prolonged love-making session the previous evening.

"Uh hmmmm..." came the drowsy reply, as Blair opened one eye and then settled his face back into place on Jim's broad and comfortable shoulder.

"Come on, babe, time's awastin'!" chuckled Jim, gently lifting the smaller body up to lie fully on top of him, so he could be nose-to-nose with the sleep-soft, adorable face. Cupping Blair's cheeks in his large hands, he kissed the succulent mouth above his, and ran his hands down the slender body to rest on the slim hips before sliding round to caress the rounded buttocks through Blair's thin boxers.

"HmMMMM..." murmured Blair again, this time decidedly less sleepily, and he returned the kiss enthusiastically before nuzzling his face against Jim's like a kitten.

"Couldn't agree more -; *very* 'hmMMMM' indeed!" growled a now fully aroused Jim, who proceeded to show the younger man just how much he was appreciated.

Some while later, after indulging in a luxurious shared shower in the large, walk-in shower stall, the two men made their way downstairs, still wrapped in their robes, to have a leisurely breakfast of toast, eggs and coffee, which they ate on the deck.

Knowing that Jim would be wanting to indulge in as much fishing as possible, Blair diffidently suggested that perhaps they could go on one of the lake's boat tours to get the lie of the land (and the lake) and enjoy a bit of exploring in a completely relaxed manner.

"Great idea, Chief!" replied Jim. "I suspect you've already pulled up some details off the tourist web pages on your laptop, haven't you?"

Blushing, Blair nodded, and, with noticeably growing enthusiasm, opened his notebook where he had jotted down the relevant information, since he didn't have access to a printer.

Choosing a trip which seemed to best meet their needs and which departed at a time most convenient for them, they dressed casually and climbed into the truck to drive to the landing stage in Chelan.

Parking up in Chelan, they booked their boat tour tickets, then, having an hour or so to spare before sailing, they took the opportunity to explore a little of the town.

While they wandered unhurriedly around the area, Jim was quick to notice that, even though he had Blair tucked protectively into his side as usual, there were very few indignant or appraising glances thrown their way, most people appearing to be completely blasé about the couple, Sentinel / Guide pairing or not.

Relaxing in the knowledge that there seemed to be no threat to his Guide, Jim was quite happy to board the cruise vessel with his mate, where he suggested to Blair that they go up to the open top deck to make the most of the sight-seeing opportunity; an idea that met with the young man's enthusiastic approval.

They thoroughly enjoyed the leisurely trip, taking in the sights, and moving hand in hand from one side of the boat to the other as appropriate to get the best views. Jim identified quiet areas which promised good fishing, and Blair simply took in everything while basking in the comfort of his Sentinel's company and undivided attention.

When the cruise ship finally returned to its berth, they decided to grab a light lunch at one of the lakeside restaurants, finding one which served delicious and wholesome home-made soups and a variety of salads.

After a little more exploring, Jim suggested they take a leisurely drive back, detouring via a particularly interesting-looking bait and tackle shop - in Jim's opinion, at least - which Blair had obligingly identified on the Chelan tourist website.

Happily browsing round the well-stocked store, Jim was aware of the friendly store manager chatting to Blair, who was relaxing visibly in the calming atmosphere of the area. Grinning to himself as he heard his young Guide explaining how the only fishing he had done had been with a Cree fishing spear, he checked out the extensive stock of rods searching for one which would suit his lover, as he was looking forward with happy anticipation to teaching the young man to fish in a more conventional manner.

Calling Blair over to him, he took down a suitable-looking rod, which he held out to his Guide.

"How about this one, babe? I think this is the right sort for you to start with. Just hold it like this..." he said, demonstrating for Blair's benefit before handing it over for his Guide to take.

"Oh Jim, are you sure? I can pay you back soon, when my Guide fee comes in," Blair replied, looking worriedly up at the taller man.

"No, Chief," came the gentle but firm response. "Your Guide stipend just about covers your basics, so I don't expect you to be buying this sort of thing for yourself, even with Eli's monthly payments to you as his Research Assistant. This is as much for my benefit as yours, babe, 'cos I'm really looking forward to teaching you to fish *without* a fishing spear! The fish'll be falling into the net laughing if you use one of those!"

"Hey, that's not fair!" laughed his Guide. "I'll have you know that I was getting pretty good with it until we had to move on..." and his voice tailed off a little sadly as he recalled yet another uprooting as Naomi's wanderlust had kicked in.

Not wanting to let Blair dwell on the unhappy thoughts, Jim slung an arm around his shoulders and steered him to the checkout where he purchased the rod along with other bits and pieces, including some extra waders in Blair's size.

Blair was soon bouncing again as they loaded the purchases into the truck, to drive home to change so they could get in a little practice before supper time.

Soon they had reached the cabin where they unloaded their new kit, and went in to change into appropriate fishing gear for a little practice on the dock. Wearing his new waders, and with his curls tucked under a totally outrageous fishing hat, Blair looked eager and happy to begin his new learning experience.

Jim couldn't help but smile fondly at him, saying, "Come on then, Junior, fish are a callin' to us!" and they settled themselves on the dock for Blair's first lesson.

It wasn't long before Jim was forced to admit that the young man seemed to be a natural, having caught his first good-sized trout within the first hour.

Not to be outdone, Jim soon followed suit, and after a while longer during which they both relaxed into the peace and calm of the activity, they returned to the house where Jim offered to clean the fish as long as Blair agreed to cook it for supper again –; a suggestion with which Blair was happy to agree.

The next few days passed in the same peaceful manner, with the pair enjoying a variety of gentle and enjoyable pastimes (including plenty more fishing) as they took the small boat out several times, and Blair grew pretty proficient at snaring his share of fish suppers. They did eat out on occasion, usually at cosy and welcoming places well off the beaten track, but in general they preferred to eat in the comfort of the cabin, either out in the fresh air on the deck or in the intimacy of the well-furnished interior.

When he tired of fishing, Blair caught up on his reading, and they both enjoyed the opportunity to walk and do plenty of sight-seeing.

One day, Blair had shyly confessed to really enjoying horse riding, so they spent an enjoyable day trail riding at a ranch not too far from the lake. Jim was impressed by his lover's skill on a horse despite the fact that Blair had had little opportunity to indulge in the sport. In fact, he was surprised at how much he enjoyed the day also, as it had been many years since he had ridden regularly, and that had been European style rather than Western as this was. It was plain for all to see how much his young Guide loved the gentle animals, and he spent as much time as he could get away with simply petting and fussing with them.

The only thing that Blair didn't want to do was to pursue any public water sports. Although he and Jim frequently took the opportunity to sunbathe and swim in the refreshing waters of the lake on their doorstep, Blair was far too conscious of the scarring on his back and limbs to be seen in public wearing nothing but swim shorts.

Jim, knowing how sensitive the young man was in that respect, didn't push him at all, simply enjoying the soft skin when it was on display, and doing his utmost to show Blair that the scarring did nothing to diminish his love and respect where his Guide was concerned. He was pleased to see that this approach seemed to work wonders in making his lover less shy and

reticent in his Sentinel's company at least, so that by the end of the holiday Blair's skin had begun to take on a healthy and most attractive tan.

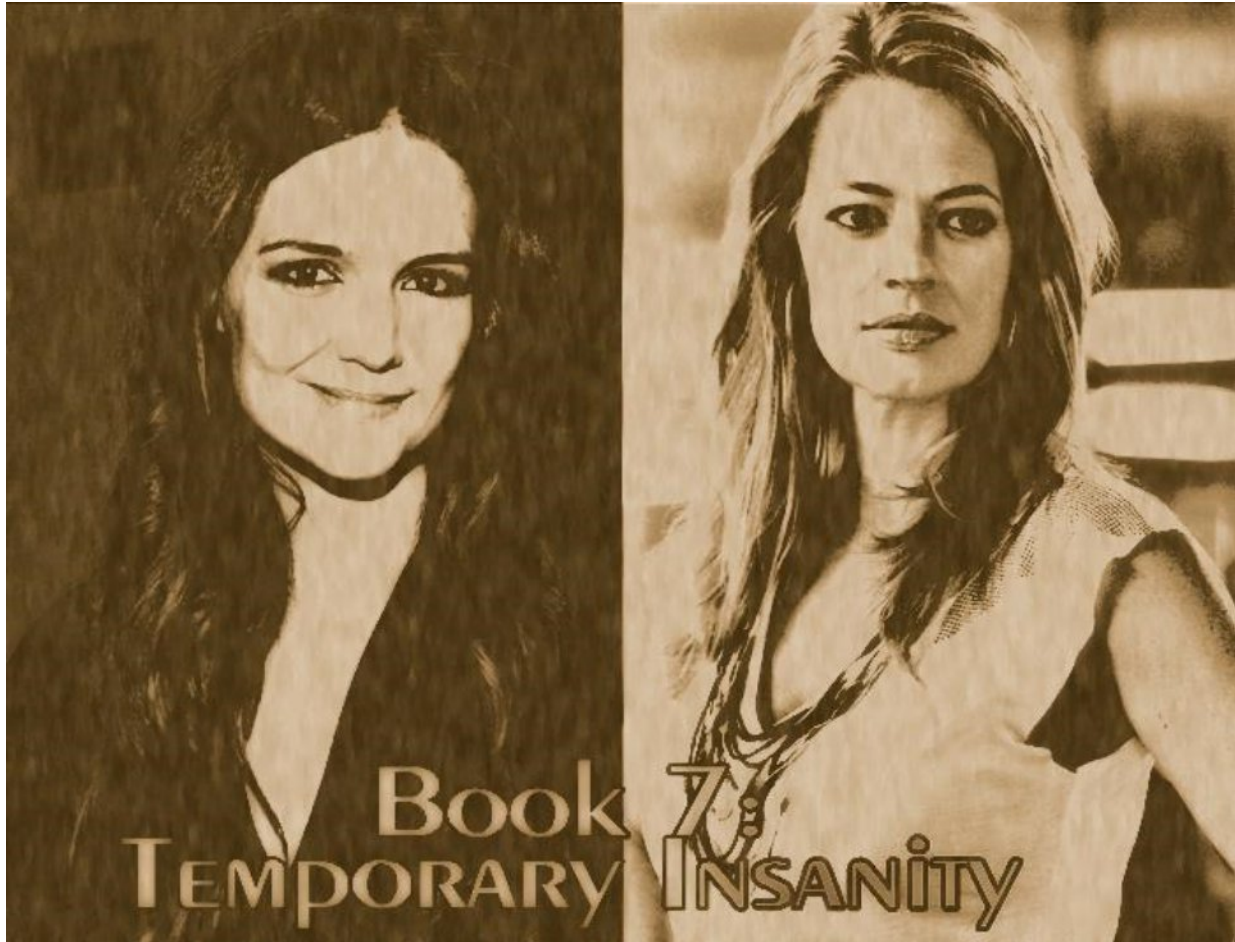
Needless to say, the nights following these activities were spent in protracted love-making, with Jim doing his utmost to pamper and cherish his Guide, and with Blair worshipping his Sentinel with all the love and care of which he was capable. Since this was a whole lot, they awoke each morning feeling an ever-growing strengthening both in respect of their bond and in their commitment to one another.

Sadly, however, their holiday time drew to a close, and they had to pack up their things and load up the truck in preparation for an early morning departure.

After a final breakfast on the deck, Blair turned to Jim and enfolded him in a spontaneous hug, saying, "Thank you for a really wonderful holiday, Jim. I've loved every minute, and I truly appreciate everything you've done for me. I only hope that, in the days to come, I can live up to your expectations and we can keep building on this relationship, because nothing means more to me than you."

"Hey, baby," replied Jim, warmed to his core by Blair's heartfelt statement. "It's been no more than you –; what we *both* –; deserve! I love you, Chief, and I'll never stop being grateful that we're bonded. Everything from now on can only get better!"

And Blair believed him.



Temporary Insanity

Cascade WA, October: Tonya Richardson's apartment:

Detective Tonya Richardson stood in front of her dressing room mirror, eyeing her reflection critically from head to foot. It was her first morning attached to Cascade PD's elite Major Crimes Unit, so she wanted to be certain of making the right impression.

Tall, athletic and strikingly good looking, she had used the minimal amount of makeup, expertly applied, and had swept her thick dark auburn tresses back from her face with a couple of barrettes.

Her blouse, like her tailored slacks, was fitted to enhance her best assets, while imparting a smart, professional aura; the whole finished off with comfortable, dark brown leather flats.

She had used her unscented body spray sparingly, and wore no other perfume or heavily scented toiletries which could irritate a Sentinel's heightened sense of smell.

Nodding sharply in satisfaction, she turned from the mirror, and, collecting up a well-cut but sensible coat and large leather purse, she stowed away her service weapon and detective's shield before leaving the apartment to take the elevator down to the parking garage.

Settling herself into her two year old Audi TT, she set off on the half hour or so commute across town from her waterfront apartment block to Central PD, concentrating on finding and maintaining her emotional equilibrium in readiness for what was undoubtedly the first major step towards the culmination of her long-held ambition.

Not that becoming a detective in the much-vaunted MCU was her main goal, although that in itself was none too shabby an achievement. No, Tonya had set herself a higher ambition still –; one to which she was sure she was uniquely entitled - that of bonding with a particular Alpha Sentinel.

As she expertly negotiated the morning traffic, she allowed herself to reflect for a while on her progress to this stage of her life, a good way of focussing on her ultimate goal and concentrating her ruthless determination on the best way to achieve it.

As the only child of a wealthy Cascade businessman and his trophy socialite wife, Tonya had enjoyed the benefits of a privileged childhood, accepting as her due the expensive private education and country club lifestyle. She was expected to graduate from some prestigious college with perhaps a Liberal Arts degree, to wed an acceptable scion of a similarly wealthy family and thus continue to enjoy the same luxurious and care-free existence happily ever after.

However, in her early teens, her whole world was turned upside down when her beloved father died suddenly in somewhat suspicious circumstances, having managed to bankrupt his company and leaving his distraught wife and angry daughter to pick up the pieces as best they could.

Her mother had no option but to uproot herself and Tonya in order to find work in the offices of an acquaintance who still deigned to speak to the impoverished woman; they moved to a modest townhouse in Tacoma, where Tonya was forced to face the reality of little pocket money and an ordinary local High School education.

However, rather than go off the rails in retaliation, Tonya used her deep and abiding anger and resentment to fight her way out of the rut in which she found herself, clawing her way single-mindedly to an honours degree in Criminal Law from a modest college. She then utilised a combination of her formidable intelligence, physical attractiveness and ruthless determination to fast track through Tacoma's Police Academy and earn her detective's shield in record time. She was well aware that she wasn't popular with her peers, but such luxury came a poor second

to her ambitions, so she coolly and efficiently used whatever means was necessary to gain promotion.

The one thing she had failed to do so far, despite her desires, was to bond with a Sentinel. Having seen what Sentinel and Guide pairs could achieve in the police force, she was bitterly jealous of both their success rates in the field and the respect in which they were held, and fervently wished to be part of such a team.

Unfortunately, although routine testing had shown that she had some empathic capability, it was considered to be too low for her to register as a Guide, much to her disgust. Nevertheless, while attending an international law enforcement conference on the East Coast, having 'persuaded' her Captain that she should be one of Tacoma PD's elected delegates, she learned of an experimental new drug which was being tested in Europe with marked success, and which might well turn out to be the answer to her prayers.

Listening to the visiting lecturer with rapt attention, Tonya absorbed the fascinating information with which the audience was being presented.

The drug in question had been developed to help Sentinels and Guides who had lost their partners, and who wanted an alternative to living the rest of their lives alone and reliant on medication to suppress their talents. The breaking of an original bond normally caused too much distress and psychological damage for the bereaved partner to consider attempting another, except perhaps on rare occasions in the case of particularly strong individuals such as Alpha Sentinels and highly rated empaths. However, should a Guide decide to go down this route in order to bond again, he or she could agree to take a course of this new drug which greatly enhanced his or her pheromones, enough to initiate an imprinting which could, with luck, be progressed to the full bonding stage.

Having done her research, Tonya knew that the strongest Alpha Sentinel in the Pacific North West was currently based in her old hometown of Cascade. Armed with that information, Tonya was convinced that, with the help of the new drug to boost her existing empathic capability, she could set herself up to bond with Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison, thus securing for herself the position of power and prestige to which she was entitled. The fact that he was already bonded to some little bastard nobody mattered not one whit to the ambitious young woman.

Likewise, the fact that the drug wasn't officially available yet made no difference to Tonya. Using all her feminine wiles, she coldly and calculatingly seduced one of the visiting scientists, 'persuading' him to secure her a sizable sample of the illicit medication before leaving him and his bed to return to Tacoma. Once there, she put in for her transfer to Cascade PD –; specifically, the Major Crimes Unit where the object of her desires worked.

Smiling to herself in satisfaction as she pulled into the PD parking garage, she was smugly content with how all the pieces of her plans had fallen neatly into place thus far, and took

herself up to the sixth floor to introduce herself to her new Captain and, very soon, her new partner.

Blair:

Sighing in contented satisfaction, Blair saved the file he had just finished updating on his laptop, and collected together the notes and papers scattered across his desk, patting them into a neat pile before setting the stack into a large box file beside his chair. Although he had been working on the same project since his arrival this morning in his tiny office-cum-storeroom in Hargrove Hall's basement, he didn't resent the hard work, as it was a task dear to his heart.

As part-time Research Assistant to the renowned anthropologist Dr Eli Stoddard, it was his allotted duty to collate and type up the bundles of notes and raw data Eli sent in sporadically when circumstances allowed during his extended expedition to Borneo. Blair was responsible for making sure that everything was in workable order for the great man to model into either a series of articles or even a monograph upon his return. The young man was proud to work alongside the man who had earned his undying gratitude and love by becoming mentor, father figure and friend since his earliest years at Rainier University, knowing that Eli appreciated his young protégé's diligence and would undoubtedly make certain that Blair received his fair share of praise and recognition in any future publications.

Rolling his shoulders and dropping his head to release the small tension in his neck from the prolonged typing, Blair was pleased to be fully up to date with his duties, having taken the best part of the long summer break away from Rainier to reaffirm his bond with Jim and to consolidate their partnership. And, it had to be said, having also enjoyed a wonderfully entertaining and relaxing holiday together –; the first real vacation that Blair had ever had in his young life. In addition, he was all the more contented because he had just learned that his mentor might well be returning to Cascade earlier than expected; something which Blair was eagerly anticipating.

Eli and his party had left for their expedition in early June, shortly after attending the wonderful surprise birthday party Jim had organised for his young Guide, and Blair had thought that they might be absent for up to a year or more. However, according to Eli's most recent message, they had gathered so much information and been made so welcome by the cooperative indigenous people, that they were able to return earlier than expected in the New Year, maybe even during January, a possibility that excited Blair enormously.

Truthfully, Blair did feel a fleeting moment of wistfulness because he had not been in a position to accompany his mentor in person, but it was quickly quashed by simple acceptance and the realisation of the fact that he had so much to be grateful for, mainly thanks to the love and

nurturing of his beloved Sentinel, without whom he knew only too well that he probably wouldn't be here now.

Thinking that he might take the opportunity of doing a little proof reading on his own Forensic Anthropology and Criminology papers before his last tutorial of the morning, he stretched his arms out in front of him, then glanced at the watch on his left wrist to check out how much time he had.

The wide plaited leather watch strap neatly covered the chain tattoo on that wrist, inflicted courtesy of Galbini, his kidnapper; just as several native beadwork bracelets virtually hid the one on his right wrist. Knowing that the beautiful choker style necklace and wolf pendant given to him by Jim did the same for the one on his neck, Blair was now able to view the disfigurements with a measure of equanimity, mostly thanks to the continuing love, moral support and encouragement of his Sentinel, such that he was more or less resigned to their presence, and growing less conscious of them as time progressed.

He was surprised to see that he had taken longer than he had thought on Eli's notes, so he decided to take a short break before his student arrived in less than half an hour, since he would be returning to the PD as soon as the tutorial ended to catch up on the mountain of paperwork he knew Jim would have accumulated on his desk. Smiling fondly to himself, Blair considered how his adored Sentinel, for such an intelligent guy, could make such a poor attempt at his written reports. Then again, as Jim was wont to point out, why bother when he had such a competent and willing helper to do them for him? Or, in other words, why have a dog and bark yourself?

Chuckling at the thought, Blair sat back in his chair, happy to take a few moments to centre himself for the upcoming tutorial.

Almost as if she was psychic herself, Janice, Eli's long-time secretary, poked her head around his door, smiling at her favourite grad student and holding out a large mocha latte.

"There you go, my lovely," she said cheerfully. "Time you had yourself a break. I know very well you've been slaving over the old man's notes ever since you arrived, so kick back for a few until Dave arrives. He's always punctual for his tutorials, so you've got a while to relax."

So saying, she plopped the large paper cup down on his desk, and retreated with a wave over her shoulder, completely satisfied by the effects of her visit, and needing no verbal response from her young 'visitee'.

As for Blair, he shut his mouth, which had fallen open in bemusement, shaking his head a little as he picked up the delicious-smelling cup of coffee. Taking an appreciative sniff, he reflected yet again on the generosity of his friends, and wondered what he had done to deserve such kindness, it never occurring to him that he earned their love by his normal everyday actions and sweet nature.

Taking a tentative sip of the hot beverage, he was careful not to let the cup come into contact with his palm, which still had a tendency to be overly sensitive even though the gashes had long since healed up.

Glancing at the neat, silvering scars, Blair tried not to dwell on the accident which had caused his injury, and which had been the one most potentially damaging to his recent bond with Jim.

Although in all honesty Blair was well aware that his reactions to the incident were probably out of all proportion to the actual event, he was realistic enough to understand that his fragile ego was to blame, and that it would be a long time, if ever, before he finally shed the worst symptoms of his PTSD. In his mind's eye he could still visualise the moment when he had crashed through a glass-topped table after being accidentally pushed aside by Jim. His Sentinel had been in the throes of primal BP mode, firmly focussed on tearing his father limb from limb for attempting to set up his beloved Guide on indecency charges.

Shaking his head, and firmly setting aside this unsettling train of thought, he concentrated instead on relaxing and enjoying the drink, happily contemplating the significance of the rapidly approaching date which would mark the first anniversary of their bond. Although Blair knew he didn't have the wherewithal to organise a party of the scale that Jim had managed for his Guide's birthday, he dearly wished to do something special to celebrate their bonding, and show his adored partner just how much he was loved and how very grateful Blair was for his rescue and claiming by Jim despite his battered and traumatised condition.

All too soon he was pulled from his contemplation by the arrival of his student, Dave Bartley, on time as usual, and he smiled and waved the young man to a chair.

"Hi, Dave. I've been looking at your paper, and I think you've really grasped the central concept. I have one or two suggestions as to the referencing, and perhaps an expansion on the question of sibling rivalry, otherwise I can't see you getting less than an 'A' grade."

Grinning, Dave was about to respond when Blair suddenly fell back into his seat, turning white with shock, his eyes wide and dazed.

"Prof! *Prof!* You OK? What's wrong?" and the student reached for Blair's hand, only pulling up short at the last moment as he remembered the cardinal rule about not touching an empath without permission. Throwing his chair aside, he ran for the outer office, where he grabbed Janice and towed her unceremoniously back to Blair's room.

By the time they returned, Blair was slightly more alert, but desperately worried still, and visibly shaking. "I'm s s sorry, D d dave. I I can't talk now...something's wrong...I have to get to Jim..." and he staggered to his feet, weaving unsteadily towards the door.

"Oh, no, dear! You're not going anywhere by yourself!" Janice declared firmly. "Dave, I'm going to drive Blair over to the PD. Please can you lock up here, and I'll arrange another tutorial date for you when Blair's feeling better, OK?"

"Sure, Janice, no problem," replied the earnest young man. "I just hope he's OK. He's probably the best Anthro tutor in the department, you know," he continued, following the others out of the room, and carefully locking the door behind him.

"Take care, Prof, and see you soon, I hope," and he watched Janice, arm wrapped supportively around Blair's waist, lead the young Guide out to the car park where she helped him into her small Ford Focus to drive him to Cascade PD and his Sentinel.

Same morning, Jim:

Alpha Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison entered the MCU bullpen with a relaxed half-smile on his handsome face, visibly at ease and comfortable with his surroundings. Although in truth he would much rather be accompanied by his beloved Guide and partner, he was well aware that his new, affable persona was due almost entirely to his bonding, almost a year ago now, to the beautiful, smart, adored and adoring bundle of hyper-sensitive (if somewhat damaged) nervous energy called Blair Sandburg, Guide *extraordinaire*.

True, they had weathered more than one unpleasant incident during that time, but it had only served to strengthen and deepen their bond, such that they could now spend a few hours apart, secure in their connection. This in turn meant that Blair was able to take a little time to himself to experience a life separate from his Sentinel and the demands of the PD and the Sentinel / Guide Department.

Nodding in greeting to Rafe and H who were already seated at their desks, he headed towards his own space, only to receive a friendly pat on the shoulder –; and dig in the ribs –; from his friends Joel Taggart and Megan Conner respectively, who had followed him into the bullpen.

"Morning Jim," said Joel, smiling kindly. "No Blair yet? Oh, yes –; he's got his hours at the U this morning, hasn't he? If he has time when he gets in, I've got a slice of Ellen's chocolate cake for him. She knows how much he appreciates it! Oh, yeah, there's a piece for you too," he added with a chuckle. "Far be it for us to show favouritism now, huh?"

"Oh I don't know," sniped Megan with a cheeky grin. "Jimbo doesn't really need choccy cake when he's got Sandy...!" and she ducked aside, chuckling at Jim's half-hearted attempt at whapping her upside the head.

Horseplay over, Jim nodded towards his Captain's office. "Who's that in with Simon? I don't recognise the scent!"

"Umm, I think it's the new recruit," replied Megan thoughtfully. "She's just been transferred from Tacoma PD. Quite a success record, I believe."

"Oh yeah, I remember seeing the memo now," said Jim, frowning slightly. "Not something I was particularly interested in, to be honest, since it isn't likely to impinge on me and Blair," and, so saying, he grinned at his two colleagues and moved away to seat himself at his desk.

"Actually, I'm not sure about that," mused Megan thoughtfully. "Apparently this one's got low level empathic capabilities much the same as Dan Brown in Vice. You and Sandy worked with him before, didn't you?"

Turning back to face her, with a small frown creasing his brow, Jim considered for a moment before replying. Yes, he and Blair had worked with Dan, and liked him very much, particularly Blair, who had taken to the gentle giant immediately. Dan, in return, had been very kind and protective of the young empath, even when Jim was being less than sympathetic himself towards his Guide. But liking and working with someone under those circumstances was a far cry from being partnered with someone in the same department on a more regular basis, and Jim found that he didn't like the implications of that much at all.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," he answered finally, but before he could continue, Simon's usual bellow rang through the bullpen.

"Ellison, my office, now!"

With a final twisted grin for his friends, Jim about turned and headed for the Captain's office, unconsciously cataloguing the scents and sounds coming from the occupants of the small room. Of the two heartbeats, the one Jim recognised as belonging to his boss was the one thudding more rapidly in nervous tension, while the second remained calm and steady. 'Whoever she is, then, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with her nerves!' he thought inconsequentially as he knocked lightly and then pushed open the door.

"Ah, Jim! Let me introduce our new recruit!" greeted Simon affably, although to Jim's eyes his smile seemed a little forced, and there was a distinct suggestion of unease in his voice, to Sentinel ears at least.

Unaware of, or perhaps purposely ignoring his lead Detective's scrutiny, Simon continued, unintentionally beginning to sound like a salesman in his too-enthusiastic introduction of the self-controlled young woman seated in the chair in front of his desk.

"This is Detective Tonya Richardson, Jim. She's newly transferred from Tacoma PD, and comes highly recommended by her Captain and Chief of Police. I want you to show her the ropes, since you'll be partnering her in the field when Sandburg isn't available."

As she stood to shake Jim's hand, his cool appraisal changed abruptly as Simon's words registered.

"With all due respect, Captain –; and not wanting to offend you, Ms Richardson –; but I don't work with anyone but Blair, you know that! When he's at the U, I've got enough control of my

senses to work alone in most circumstances, thanks to his training, so I don't need a babysitter!"

"Now, Jim, I know and *you* know you're OK under most conditions –; and Blair always comes running if needed –; but this isn't just my decision. Chief Warren wants to make as much use of his Sentinel / Guide units as possible, since there are so many now drawn to work in Cascade, thanks no doubt to you and Blair as the Alpha bonded pair. He believes that it will be of benefit to you to have a stand-in when Blair's busy at the U or at the Sentinel / Guide Department. It's out of my hands!" By the time Simon finished speaking, Jim was sure there was a faintly plaintive edge to his normally confident tone, but that didn't placate Jim any.

Grinding his teeth together in barely-controlled fury, Jim glowered at the young woman still gazing coolly at him, a quizzical expression on her admittedly extremely attractive face.

"We'll see about that!" he ground out. Then, rather ungraciously he turned to leave the office, snapping over his shoulder, "You coming then?" as he returned to his desk looking to everyone in the bullpen as if he had his own personal thundercloud hanging over his head.

Simon looked apologetically at his new recruit. "I'm sorry about that, Tonya, but I did warn you. Detective Ellison's attitude is legendary, I'm afraid, unless young Blair is with him, that is."

"Don't worry about it, Captain," she replied with a small smile. "I've encountered far worse, and I'm sure we'll get over any problems as soon as we've worked together for a while," and, with a nod, she turned and followed her new partner into the bullpen, privately delighted with the situation despite Jim's less-than-welcoming demeanour.

When Tonya joined Jim at his desk, she moved towards the other chair there, only to have Jim growl, "That's Blair's chair. You can pull up another one from over there," he added, nodding towards the neighbouring empty desk. "Rafe and H are in court this morning, so they won't be needing them for now. I guess Rhonda'll get one for you in due course."

Smiling sweetly, even though she would dearly love to kick his shins, Tonya said, "Sure Jim. I wouldn't want to usurp your Guide's place..."and only just caught his muttered aside, '*As if!*'

'*That's what you think, Sentinel!*' she thought to herself, schooling her expression to one of friendly, professional interest as Jim began to push forms and files towards her in a somewhat grudging attempt to fill her in on the latest cases and procedures.

After a couple of hours listening to the almost constant litany of, "Blair says...Blair does it this way...Blair figured out that one..." and hearing the same type of comments repeated by almost everyone else in the bullpen when asked, Tonya was feeling decidedly antsy and frustrated, although she was very careful not to give herself away. She really couldn't wait to see this paragon of virtue for herself, just so she could sum up the opposition, and then destroy it.

Eventually, Jim, who was after all a courteous man by nature, began to thaw out under her gentle questioning, and began to really take notice of the new detective.

She was well-dressed and very striking rather than vacuously pretty, with long, slim legs and an obviously toned and fit body. He was impressed by her serious attention to his words, and the intelligent questions she posed, such that he was moved to think privately that, were he and Blair not so deeply connected, she would have been his type of choice in the dating game.

Brushing the thought aside almost as soon as it occurred, he sat back and said, "Since we've covered the outstanding cases so far, I guess we could go and follow up a couple of leads Blair and I were going to do this afternoon. It'll save him having to traipse around after me, and he'll be able to catch up on the outstanding paperwork. He's so much better than me at it, I tend to land him with it whenever I can get away with it," he added, smiling fondly.

"Sure, Jim. Works for me!" she replied, getting to her feet with alacrity. "I'll just make a pit stop on the way, then I'm all yours," and, smiling, she grabbed her purse and turned to make her way to the ladies' restroom. "Shall I meet you in the parking garage?" she added.

"Yeah, that'll be good," answered Jim, a little distractedly. "See you down there." And he busied himself collecting together the information he needed to take with them, not noticing her speculative glance back towards him as she left the bullpen, purse and coat over her arm.

In the restroom, Tonya ducked into a cubicle, and carefully checked to make sure she had the micro spray of medication stowed in her purse. She had deliberately disguised the liquid in a miniature perfume bottle, so that, should anyone catch her dabbing it on herself, it shouldn't arouse undue curiosity. However, since it had to be used sparingly, and, being quick-acting, preferably immediately before getting close to the intended new bond partner, she fully intended to give herself a tiny squirt just before she exited the elevator for the parking garage. Whichever vehicle they shared –; and it would only be common sense to do so –; the proximity should be more than enough to give Jim his first 'dose' of her pheromones and prospective Guide scent.

Leaving the cubicle to move to the basin to wash her hands, she looked up at the arrival of Megan, who nodded to her slightly stiffly.

Deciding to do a little stirring up of her co-worker's emotional mindset, she smiled at the Aussie Inspector, and asked in a slightly conspiratorial 'woman to woman' tone what Blair was really like?

"I know Jim obviously thinks the world of him," she said understandingly. "But it must be very hard for them to get over the sort of hurt and psychological damage that poor young man had to have suffered...?"

Snorting in disgust, Megan replied sharply, "Not that it's any of your business, mate, but Blair's just fine. And if he ever has any problems, there're plenty of blokes here who'll help him and Jim out. He's one of the sweetest and bravest kids I've ever known, even if he does look really fragile. He's a genuine projecting-bloody-empath too, you know, which comes in really handy when some blokes cut up rough, so you'd be well advised to respect that!"

"Oh, don't worry, I shall!" came the cool response, and, still smiling, Tonya left the restroom, thinking that she had her work cut out to undermine the young Guide's credibility, but that it could be done. It just needed a whisper campaign and a few dark hints to set the ball rolling.

Leaving the elevator at the parking garage level, Tonya surreptitiously squirted the liquid behind her ear where her own scent was strongest, and walked over to where Jim was waiting somewhat impatiently beside a classic blue and white truck.

"Nice wheels, Jim –; I can call you Jim?" she said, raising an eyebrow in enquiry.

"Sure, Detec –; I mean, Tonya. I guess that'd be OK," he replied a little cagily. "Hop in and we'll drive over to the warehouse district and see if we can't spot my snitch."

Smiling slightly smugly, Tonya did as he said, and settled herself in the passenger seat, Jim climbing in immediately after.

As he reached over to turn the ignition, he reared back slightly with a puzzled frown. "D'you smell anything off?" he asked, sniffing lightly. "There's a definite spicy scent in here."

"No, Jim, but, there again, I'm not a Sentinel, am I?" responded Tonya, chuckling as if it were a joke. "I'm sure it's nothing," and she concentrated on doing up her seatbelt, while mentally high-fiving herself. *'Now, just let's see if it works as well as it's supposed to,'* she thought, carefully controlling her reactions, and maintaining a gentle stream of inconsequential chat during the drive to the warehouse, all the time cataloguing Jim's growing agitation.

By the time they pulled up by the dockside, Jim was feeling more than a little antsy. The scent of Guide pheromones was strong in his nasal passages, and the feral Sentinel within growled in frustration, wanting only to sniff, touch and taste the Guide in question, irrespective of his own deep bond with another.

Shaking his head in a vain attempt to clear it, Jim jumped down swiftly from the truck in order to distance himself from the source of temptation, while Ellison the man still maintained some sort of control.

"Something wrong, Jim?" asked Tonya, affecting innocent inquisitiveness. "Do you need some help?"

"No –;Yes –;I don't know," came the strained response. "I think I need Blair..." and then Jim's eyes rolled back in his head as Tonya approached, and another wave of pheromones crashed over him to send him stumbling to the ground in a dead faint, at precisely the same moment as Blair was struck by a deep sense of 'wrongness' in their empathic link as he sat in his office at Rainier.

'Hmmm. Stuff really *is* strong,' thought Tonya, smirking wickedly. 'Phase one complete, I think!' and she busied herself calling up Dispatch to report 'officer down' and requesting the appropriate emergency services to take her and her new partner in to the Sentinel / Guide ward of Cascade General Hospital.

The ambulance arrived within minutes, and in a very short time Jim was lifted onto a gurney and loaded into the back. Meanwhile Tonya remained close by like the perfect stand-in Guide, maintaining a grounding hold on the patient, and accompanying him for treatment just as a responsible Guide should, all the while assuming an appropriate expression of concern, sympathy and competence.

On arrival at Cascade General, Jim was admitted immediately to the Sentinel / Guide Specialist Unit, where Jim's old friend Dr Stevens was waiting to see him. Somewhat taken aback when he saw that it was a young woman accompanying his patient rather than Blair, Dr Stevens frowned in consternation.

"What happened to Sentinel Ellison? And where's Blair? He should be here!" he snapped at the woman, whose badge identified her as Detective Tonya Richardson, Cascade PD.

Frowning in irritation at the terse question, Tonya said stiffly, "I'm acting as Sentinel Ellison's Guide for now. I understand Guide Sandburg is having time to himself at the University," making it sound as if the young man was off enjoying himself while his Sentinel suffered.

"That's as may be," Stevens responded, sniffing disbelievingly, "but he'll be here soon, I can guarantee it. Meanwhile, what can you tell me about Jim's collapse?"

"To be honest, I've no idea," lied Tonya, affecting an air of innocent bafflement. "We'd just arrived at the warehouse district to follow up a lead and Jim suddenly collapsed. I called for the emergency services and stayed with him to keep him grounded," she added, with not a little self-congratulation. "And now I'd better call the MCU to let them know what's happening!" and, so saying, she went out into the corridor to do just that, leaving the doctor gazing after her in perplexity before turning his attention back to the unconscious man on the gurney.

At almost the same moment Tonya was finishing up her call to Simon Banks, Blair stumbled into the bullpen. He was as white as a ghost, and leaned heavily on the arm of a kindly, middle-aged

lady who Joel recognised as Janice, Dr Stoddard's secretary, having met her at Blair's birthday party.

"What's wrong with him? Blair, son, talk to me!" he said worriedly as he rushed over to the pair.

It was Janice who answered first, saying, "He was just starting a tutorial when he came over all strange, and said something was wrong with Jim. I thought I'd better get him here straight away!" and she gladly relinquished her young friend to Joel's strong arms.

"M all right, but Jim's not!" gasped Blair, clutching weakly at Joel's jacket. "Got to get to him –; see him! Something's wrong, Joel! Please take me to him!"

As Joel tried to steer him to a nearby chair, and Megan flew over to help, Simon burst out of his office calling out, "That was Detective Richardson calling from Cascade General. Jim's been taken there after collapsing in the warehouse district. We need to find Blair...Oh! Right! He's here already –; guess I should have known! Come on, kid, let's get you to your Sentinel," and, nodding his thanks at Janice, he took up a position beside the distressed Guide, while Joel supported the trembling body from the other side, and they hurried out of the bullpen closely followed by Megan.

As the doors closed behind the party, Rhonda gazed after them worriedly before returning to her small office. She didn't know *how* she knew, but she was convinced that the situation had something to do with that new detective, who had come over as a little 'off' in Rhonda's opinion, and she was determined to have a chat about it to her good friend Megan as soon as possible.

As soon as Simon pulled up outside the hospital, Blair more or less flew out of the car, and raced towards the elevator to the Sentinel / Guide Unit, leaving the others to follow in his wake as fast as they could.

Arriving at the nurses' station, he was recognised immediately, and shown to a cubicle by a helpful young nurse. Not even registering the woman standing just outside, he pushed his way in and hurried to the gurney where Jim lay.

"Oh man! Oh Jim! I *knew* something was wrong! Come on, Big Guy; open your eyes for me. Please wake up Jim! I need to know you're all right!" and he stroked the immobile face with one hand while rubbing soothing circles on his Sentinel's chest with the other.

Belatedly realising Dr Stevens was there beside him, he whispered, "Dr Stevens! I'm so glad you're here. Can you tell me what happened?"

Gently laying a calming hand on the young man's shoulder, the older man said, "I'm afraid I don't know much as yet, Blair. Jim was brought in about an hour ago by his new police partner,

who claims he just collapsed while they were at the warehouse district, and she called it in. She couldn't say what could have caused it."

Frowning in real worry, Blair muttered, "But we were supposed to do the warehouse trip together this afternoon! Why would Jim be there with some new partner? I don't understand...!"

Just then the large body beneath his hands shuddered, and Jim woke with a groan. Raising a heavy arm, he grasped Blair around the back of the neck and pulled the unresisting Guide towards him so he could nuzzle Blair's ear and neck, acquiring a very necessary grounding scent from his bonded Guide.

However, this time the comforting scent seemed to be strangely lacking a little something –; like a missing nuance of fragrance. Not realising that it was the fading residue of Tonya's medication, but feeling slightly bereft from its absence, he growled unhappily before opening his eyes fully and looking up into his lover's pale face.

"'Bout time you got here, Sandburg!" he grumbled. "Where were you when I needed you, huh?"

"Jim! That's not fair!" gasped Blair in horror, not realising that Dr Stevens was nodding in agreement with his sentiments from his position behind the young Guide, an angry frown replacing the doctor's normally genial expression.

"We agreed I should spend the morning at the U! And I felt the moment you were taken ill, honest! Janice took me straight to the MCU, and Simon and Joel and Megan brought me here. It's only been an hour or so, and you shouldn't have been there without me anyway if you were going to risk using your senses unguided!"

"Huh! Well, that's as may be, but it's a good job I had the new Detective with me. It could have been a lot worse if she hadn't have acted quickly in getting me here!"

Swallowing hard at the unfairness of the comment, Blair bit his lip in unhappiness, not understanding why his beloved Sentinel should make such a statement. Feeling the doctor's hand on his shoulder squeezing a little in tacit support, he held his tongue, thinking that further comment at this point could well lead to a real disagreement, and he honestly didn't feel up to one right now.

Ducking his head down in hurt and unwonted shame, he listened while Dr Stevens questioned Jim as to how he felt, and whether he was content to go home and rest in his Guide's capable hands.

Answering in the affirmative, but not understanding or appreciating the older man's barely contained air of disapproval, Jim pulled himself up with Blair's help, and, after a moment of slight dizziness had passed, declared himself good to go.

Having heard the whole of the exchange from her spot outside the cubicle, Tonya was hard put to keep the smirk of triumph off her face, and took a few moments to school her expression into a more appropriate one of cool concern for the benefit of Captain Banks and Joel and Megan who came to join her.

"I believe Detective Ellison is OK," she informed the others. "Apparently he has woken up and wants to go home with Guide Sandburg. I could go with them, if you'd like? I asked one of the uniforms to bring Jim's truck to the hospital."

"No, I don't think so," said Simon, although he gave the suggestion due consideration in view of his new Detective's able performance today. "I think they would benefit from a little one-on-one bonding time," he added with a chuckle, not noticing the faint twitch of disgust which flitted across Tonya's face. It didn't pass unnoticed by Megan, though, and she knew she'd be mentioning her disquiet to Joel and maybe her friend Rhonda also....

Just then, Jim and Blair exited the cubicle, with Jim leaning a little on his Guide, arm hooked over the smaller man's slender shoulders.

"Hey, Simon! Thanks for getting Blair here so quickly. I'm fine now, just a little muzzy. Thanks to Tonya's quick actions..." he added, grinning at the woman in question, who smiled sweetly in response.

"No problem, Jim!" she said quickly. "It's only what a good Guide would do after all!" and let the statement hang out there in the open for her new colleagues to make of it what they would.

Blair, in the meantime, had yet to raise his head, but when Jim tugged at him a little to turn him for the exit he whispered, "Thank you, Detective Richardson. It was good of you to help Jim." Then he stared at his feet again, before straightening his shoulders and concentrating on helping his Sentinel to the elevator and then back to the loft, unaware of the puzzled expressions on his friends' faces as they gazed after the departing pair.

Simon offered to take Tonya back to the office with him, seeing as he had brought Joel and Megan in his sedan, and the group followed silently in Jim and Blair's footsteps, each wrapped in his or her own thoughts.

The Loft, that afternoon:

As Blair helped Jim out of the truck, which for once he had been allowed to drive without comment or complaint, he remained quiet and worried at his lover's distracted air.

On their arrival in the loft, he immediately took Jim's coat to hang up with his own, and hurried to the kitchen to make some tea for them both. That done, he brought the tray over to the coffee table, and looked expectantly at his lover.

"Um, this should help you feel better, man. It's supposed to help you relax..." he whispered.

"Yeah, sure, Chief," replied Jim offhandedly. "I'm sure you're right," and he took a couple of sips before saying, "You know, I think I'll go up for a nap. I'm feeling a bit groggy still. Try not to make a noise if you're going to watch the TV, kid," and with that he stood and moved towards the stairs, completely unaware of the hurt on his young Guide's face. As if Blair would *ever* make a noise, or create a disturbance while his Sentinel slept.

Swallowing hard, Blair said, "Sure, Jim. Er...should I come up with you? I'd like to hold you if I can?"

"Nah, not right now, Chief. Maybe later," came the unexpected reply, and now Blair was truly upset. Jim had never withheld his touch before, knowing how comforting and healing it was for both of them. Nevertheless, he held his tongue again, hoping against hope that a nap might put his lover in a better frame of mind so they could do a little much-needed bonding later. Opening his mind, he tentatively tried to open their link, hoping to find comfort and understanding there, only to find that Jim wasn't responding. His Sentinel's mind remained stubbornly and inexplicably closed to that of his Guide.

Stifling a disturbing urge to cry at the sudden feeling of loneliness which swept through him, Blair retired to his small office to try and distract himself by doing a little more work on his papers, only to remember that his backpack and laptop were still locked up safely in his office at Rainier.

Sighing in disappointment, he settled down on the futon in an attempt to meditate in order to clear his mind and help him think through the last few strange hours.

Much later, Blair awoke suddenly after having fallen asleep at some point during his meditation. Climbing quickly off the futon, he hurried upstairs to see how Jim was doing, only to come to an abrupt halt at the top of the staircase. Jim was moving about restlessly, although obviously still deeply asleep, and Blair could clearly hear what he was muttering in agitation. "Mmmm, yeah, that's it, Tonya, mmmm, yeaaaah!"

Horrified, Blair backed off down a couple of steps before taking himself in hand and giving himself an angry mental talking-to. 'It doesn't mean what it sounds like, Blair' he told himself. 'You're reading too much into it. Jim wouldn't do anything to hurt you, you know that! He's your Sentinel!'

However, a small voice deep inside whispered insinuatingly into his consciousness. *'Oh come on! You knew this would happen eventually! Why on Earth would a gorgeous Alpha Sentinel like Jim be content to hang around with a scarred little nobody like you for eternity? Get real! He might need your empathic ability to Guide him, but he sure doesn't need to rely on you for his sexual satisfaction! You're only a mobster's cast-off fucktoy after all!'*

Quickly stomping down on that train of thought, Blair straightened up and climbed back up the steps, to cross over to where Jim was now sleeping more peacefully. Deciding against trying to wake his lover for dinner, he quickly stripped off his clothes and slid into bed next to the warm, muscular body, tucking himself in as close as he could to the comforting heat before finally drifting off into a troubled sleep.

Part 2: A disaster in the making:

The following morning, Jim awoke to find the bed empty, and opened his hearing to discover his Guide downstairs in the kitchen, apparently preparing a breakfast of bacon, eggs and toast. As his stomach rumbled in anticipation, Jim grinned to himself, looking forward to the meal and catching a cuddle and then perhaps a shower with his Guide. Although he had a niggling suspicion that something hadn't been quite right yesterday, he had no recollection of any problem between Blair and himself, so he stretched luxuriously and headed downstairs to use the bathroom before going to the kitchen and his Guide.

Hearing Jim come downstairs and veer off to the bathroom, Blair took a deep, steadying breath, and schooled his face into an expression of welcome, hoping against hope that his Sentinel was feeling better.

When Jim approached, looking relaxed and happy, the knot of tension inside him eased abruptly, and Blair smiled with genuine relief and pleasure as Jim wrapped his strong arms around him and lifted him off his feet a little to give him a very satisfying morning kiss.

"Hey, babe, why the gourmet breakfast? Not that I'm complaining, but you must have got up extra early to go to all this trouble."

"It's no trouble, Jim, honest! I just thought that, seeing as we both missed dinner last night, we should have a good breakfast to make up for it. How do you feel this morning? No side effects from yesterday?"

Appearing a little puzzled at the question, Jim replied, "No, babe, no side effects. But I still don't really know what all that was about. Do you have any theories, Einstein? To be honest, I don't remember that much."

Gently pulling away from Jim to dish up the food and get them seated in order to give himself time to reply, Blair finally smiled over at his lover, saying, "All I can think of, Jim, is that there must have been something particularly obnoxious at the warehouse –; perhaps a chemical spillage somewhere of something you haven't encountered before. I guess it's a good job you weren't alone..." he added quietly, smile fading at the thought.

Not noticing Blair's change of expression, or even registering the faint scent of sadness coming from the smaller body, Jim grinned as he took a bite of eggs, chewing appreciatively before answering, "Yeah, Tonya did OK, didn't she? You know Chief, I never would have accepted that I

could work with another cop partner, but she really is something, isn't she? Now we know she's on the ball with sentinel stuff, you can relax and take some more time to yourself, huh? I don't mind if you want to extend your hours at the U, kiddo. You could do that project Adam Kingsley wanted you to do over at the Sentinel / Guide Dept also, now you won't have to worry about me so much!" and he continued to enjoy his meal, unaware of the strained look that spread across his Guide's pale face as Blair pushed his plate away, appetite gone.

Still preoccupied with his own thoughts, Jim finished off his breakfast and mechanically helped Blair clear away the dishes, not mentioning the fact that most of Blair's portion went down the waste disposal. However, he was cheerful enough at the thought of sharing their normal morning shower, and carefully soaped up his little Guide's precious body, whilst taking pleasure and comfort in their shared link. If he noticed that Blair wasn't quite so open and receptive to his mental probing as he usually was, he didn't react, even though normally there was nothing Blair held back from him.

Dressed and ready to leave, Jim said, "I guess you'll be needing me to drop you off at Rainier, huh? Will you be coming in to the PD later? I've got a good bit of paperwork needs catching up with, if you're up for it, and you can get to know Tonya better. Unless we're out, of course."

Cringing internally, but trying for his normal cheerfulness, Blair replied, "Yeah, thanks, Jim. I'll be able to get to the PD by lunchtime, all being well. Just got one class and a tutorial to do. That's if Dave wants to get it over and done with early, seeing as he'd barely sat down yesterday before I went all weird on him," he finished wryly.

"Sure Chief. Now, shake a leg, or I'm going to be late," and Jim pushed him gently but insistently towards the door, locking up behind them before jogging down to the truck to ferry his passenger over to the campus.

On arriving outside Hargrove Hall, Jim pulled his lover over for a quick kiss, then leaned over to open the passenger door.

"There you go, babe. Have a good morning, and see you later," he said brightly, then set off for the PD, humming contentedly to himself and completely oblivious of the dismayed expression on his Guide's face as Blair watched him drive away.

As Blair turned to walk a bit despondently up the steps to Hargrove Hall, his spirits were lifted slightly by the genuine pleasure he felt in the cheerful greetings he received from passing students, and were buoyed up even further on entering Janice's office, to receive an uninhibited hug from the older woman, and a concerned enquiry into both his and Jim's condition.

Assuring her that they were both fine, and thanking her profusely for her help the previous day, he tried to maintain a relaxed and calm expression, uncomfortably aware that she didn't look overly convinced, but had the tact not to push it any further.

Unwilling to labour the point, Janice asked if Blair would like her to see if she could contact Dave Bartley to reschedule his tutorial.

Smiling shyly at his friend, Blair replied, saying, "Yes please, Janice. I felt really bad about letting him down yesterday, so if he has the time, perhaps I could see him straight after my 9.00 am class."

"Leave it with me, Hon," the kindly secretary responded. "I'll get right on it and get back to you as soon as he lets me know."

Thanking her sincerely once again, Blair retreated to his cubby hole of an office to retrieve his backpack and the books he would need for his class.

After a busier than usual morning, since Dave Bartley had been only too glad to take the opportunity of rescheduling his tutorial for immediately after Blair's class, Blair entered the bullpen in a slightly more positive frame of mind. Buoyed up by his interaction with his friends at the U, and having given himself another good talking to, he was determined to let go of his self-pity and assert his right to his Sentinel's attention.

However, it was immediately obvious that Jim and Tonya were out, as evidenced by the post-it note stuck on the top of a pile of paperwork which read, 'Something to keep you occupied, Chief. See you later, J'.

Swallowing down his disappointment, and feeling as if his heart was sinking to his boots, Blair glanced surreptitiously around him only to note that everyone seemed to be bent over their desks, studiously avoiding his eyes. However, the uncomfortable moment was broken by Rhonda, who sailed serenely out of her office bearing hot chocolate and cookies for the sad-looking young man, who in his turn did his very best to smile in appreciation while stifling the urge to weep in frustration at Jim's uncharacteristic behaviour.

Patting his cheek with a cool hand, Rhonda smiled back at him, worry lurking behind her kind eyes, before returning to her office to contemplate just what she would love to do to a certain unthinking Sentinel. Grimly smiling to herself, she thought that perhaps pins stuck into Voodoo doll replicas of Jim and Detective Tonya Richardson might be appropriate.

As the day wore on interminably, Blair worked his way doggedly through the large pile of paperwork, his state of mind deteriorating by the hour as he awaited Jim and Tonya's return.

Having been brought up to speed by Joel and Megan, although reserving their own judgement regarding Jim's behaviour for the time being, Rafe and H made a real effort to pass time with the young Guide as Megan and Joel were out of office following up on a case.

Eventually Jim and Tonya returned, breezing into the bullpen and virtually glowing with smug satisfaction having come up with several useful leads on one of their current cases, plus a potential witness, whom Jim intended to interview the following morning.

Strolling up to his desk, Jim paused to ruffle Blair's curls, saying brightly, "Hey, Chief! Finished with that pile of paperwork yet?" Then, continuing before Blair had a chance to respond, he added, "I'm taking Tonya for a beer after we've done with our reports. We need to discuss the interview tomorrow, OK? You can come along if you want, but I guess you'll be pretty bored with the shop-talk, hey?"

"Um, no, I wouldn't," replied Blair quietly. "But I don't suppose you need my input? Er...I'll see you later at the loft?" he finished, unable to keep the hopeful tone from his voice.

Unfortunately, his efforts went unrewarded as Jim replied distractedly, "Sure, kid, but I don't know what time I'll be back. We may grab something to eat, so don't worry about cooking, OK? You can have a quiet night to yourself with your dusty old books and papers," he finished with a chuckle, unaware of the effects of his patronising words while Tonya, who was standing at his shoulder, couldn't quite refrain from cracking a smug smile at the Guide's discomfiture and expression of wide-eyed hurt and disappointment.

As Jim and Tonya settled down to completing their reports, exchanging familiar banter and knowing grins, Blair quietly stowed his work in his backpack and with a soft and virtually ignored, "See you later, Jim," crept out of the bullpen with head lowered and shoulders slumped in deepening depression.

In his attempt to make his exit as unobtrusive as possible, Blair was unaware of the angry mutterings from several other officers in the bullpen, although, if he *had* heard them, he would have been amazed to find that the disgust was directed not at him, but towards his Sentinel and one Detective Tonya Richardson.

Over the next several days, it became increasingly obvious to everyone who knew Jim and Blair that something was deeply wrong with their partnership; everyone, that is, except apparently Jim himself.

He appeared to be blissfully unaware of the increasing coldness and disgust directed at him from both work colleagues and friends, firmly settled into his working partnership with Tonya, and fully believing that his Guide was just fine and enjoying having more time to himself to establish a life outside of Jim and the PD. If he showed any sign of concern over Blair's pale and sorrowful face, and the rapid loss of weight the young man could ill afford, a judicious dab of pheromone-enhancing medication behind Tonya's ear soon distracted him and brought his attention back to the wannabe guide.

As for Tonya, she was coldly dismissive of her colleagues' snide comments and even outright hostility, never having been unduly concerned with popularity anyway, and sure that, once she had Jim fully under her control, her status as Alpha Guide of the Cascade 'clan' would earn her respect if not friendship.

For Blair's part, he sank further and further into his depression, completely baffled by the change in his beloved Sentinel's attitude toward him, and quite honestly seeing no way of fighting his way out of the downward spiral, unless it was by getting rid of Detective Richardson herself. Since he would far rather sacrifice himself than see Jim hurt in any way, that course of action seemed to be completely out of the question.

It had to be said that mornings at the loft were rather better, since Jim would have spent several hours sleeping in his own bed with his true Guide, away from Tonya and the addictive effects of the drug. However, his demeanour was becoming more like that of one buddy to another, rather than to a bonded Guide and lover, even though he didn't hold back from offering the mutual support of their link should Blair dare to request it on account of his fraying empathic shields. It was, after all, genetically hard-wired into a Sentinel to comfort and protect a hurting Guide, especially when said Sentinel was an Alpha, and the hurting Guide his own.

Blair couldn't fail to notice however, that Jim's caresses were growing more perfunctory than passionate, and during their linking, his full attention was certainly not on his Guide. As for the full bond, Jim had made no moves in that direction since the arrival of Tonya, and Blair had far too little self-confidence to instigate the sexual act for himself.

He continued to perform his duties both in the bullpen and at Rainier, as his sense of honour required that he do no less, but his University friends and students were worried that the sparkle had gone from their young professor, and they were at a loss as to how they could make things better for him.

Likewise, at the PD he continued to do Jim and Tonya's paperwork, treated unconsciously by Jim, but deliberately by Tonya, like a mindless gofer, so that he soon began to see himself as some sort of pet, albeit a somewhat useful one, rather like a seeing-eye dog.

Nevertheless, on at least two occasions when Jim and Tonya were out in the field, Blair was summoned urgently to pull Jim out of a deep zone, which he had done with relative ease; something that Tonya, much to her disgust, was completely unable to do. Her covert reaction to Blair on these occasions was positively venomous, although she remained convinced that, once the little nobody was out of the picture, and she was fully bonded to Jim, she would be able to guide him successfully in all respects.

Simon Banks was also in something of a quandary, realising that his department was showing real signs of internal unrest and dissatisfaction. Certainly on one level, he was more than

pleased with the success rate of the new partnership of Jim and Tonya, and Chief Warren was smugly content with the facts and figures.

However, despite a rocky start, Simon had found himself growing surprisingly fond of Jim's small Guide, having been helped by the young man on more than one occasion, and his son Daryl was particularly taken by the empath. It didn't take a Sentinel to see how unhappy the young man was when he turned up at the bullpen to be all but ignored by Jim, who devoted virtually all his attention to his cop partner. Any interaction between Blair and Tonya left the younger man more down and despondent than ever, as it usually took the form of her commenting audibly on his appearance, or his past history of abuse, under the guise of sympathetic concern. It might have fooled Jim into believing that her interest in his Guide was genuine, but the empath and the other occupants of the bullpen could easily discern the malicious intent behind the sweetly-worded remarks.

On the other hand, his friends made extra efforts to include Blair in their conversations, and Megan, Joel and Rhonda in particular went out of their way to offer comfort and treats in the form of hugs, cookies, coffee and magazines that they hoped would distract the despondent Guide, and he never failed to make a valiant effort to thank them for their kindnesses, even if the brave attempts were painful to witness.

It was also noticeable that the PD's other Sentinel / Guide pairings began to make a point of dropping in frequently to the MCU from their own departments in order to assess the puzzling situation for themselves, and to offer moral and empathic support to their suffering Alpha Guide. Even other sensitives such as Detective Dan Brown from Vice took it upon themselves to check up on the small empath; Dan being particularly fond of Blair, and anxious to try and cheer up the young man; and it was a mark of Jim's atypical behaviour that, rather than reacting with angry possessiveness at the other pairs' intrusion into his territory, and their unseemly interest in his bonded Guide, he simply accepted the visits with equanimity and precious little interest.

The whole bizarre situation was causing so much consternation within the ranks of the Cascade clan that Director Kingsley from the Sentinel / Guide Department was driven to call an extraordinary meeting of all the interested parties, other than the Alpha pair themselves in the first instance, in an urgent attempt to try and pin down the reason for Jim's aberrant conduct.

Thus it was that, once everyone had gathered around the large conference table in the Department's main building, Adam Kingsley rose to address his audience.

"First of all, ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming here today. I know most of you will have already met during 'clan gatherings' and work situations, so I won't waste time with unnecessary introductions. I would, however, like to draw your attention to my colleague here, Dr Gerry Larson, who is my Director of Sentinel / Guide Research, and who *might* have a

plausible theory into what is causing the strange behaviour patterns in our Alpha Sentinel, Detective Jim Ellison.

"Before I ask him to fill you in on his ideas, however, I think it would be helpful for us to get the ball rolling by inviting you as individuals to describe your own reactions and conclusions regarding our dilemma." And with that, he threw the floor open for members of his audience to speak.

The first to speak was Sentinel Detective Ralph Smithson from Homicide, who, with his Guide and wife Stephanie had been one of the first pairs to be drawn to Cascade by the unconscious pull which emanated from the appearance of an Alpha Sentinel. They were also present when the newly rescued Blair was brought to the PD, shortly to be claimed by and bonded to Jim despite a fair amount of opposition, and they were both extremely fond of the young empath.

"Director, Dr Larson, fellow Sentinels and Guides," Ralph began formally. "I know I speak for all of you when I say how worried and upset Stephanie and I have become by the damage that has occurred in the last few days to Alpha Sentinel Ellison's empathic link with Alpha Guide Sandburg. The deep distress leaking from Blair is wearing on us, particularly as it seems to be fairly formless. Personally, I think this is because Blair, as a very strong empath, is doing his best to protect and shield us from his pain –; something which is both admirable, but ultimately unhelpful in terms of allowing us to 'see' exactly what shape his distress is taking. Having said that, I think it is fairly obvious to all concerned that the breakdown in the Alphas' bond coincided with the arrival of Detective Tonya Richardson from Tacoma.

"Now, I realise the woman is an acknowledged, but very low-grade empath –; too low to rate on the Guide register –; but I have noticed that on the occasions I have come into contact with her, especially while she is accompanying Jim, I feel there is some strange draw coming from her. Almost as if she has somehow 'upgraded' her Guide ability. Has anyone else found this to be the case?" and he gazed enquiringly over his fellow Sentinels.

"That's a good way of putting it, Ralph," replied Sentinel Detective Mick Kavanagh, smiling at his Guide, Eddy Francis.

More seriously, he continued, "Although I couldn't pinpoint it immediately, I felt a weird sort of 'pull' towards the woman myself when Eddy and I met with her and Alpha Sentinel Ellison at a crime scene yesterday. Thanks to Eddy, though, nothing came of it," and here he grinned conspiratorially at Eddy, remembering only too vividly the swift kick to his ankle that his Guide had used to distract him from his unwanted interest, and offering wry apologies yet again through their shared link.

"I've noticed an odd presence also," added Mary Kelly thoughtfully, squeezing the shoulder of her Guide, Stewart Carlson in friendly support. "Although she interests me not one whit," she continued, smiling fondly down at her Guide, "Alpha Sentinel Ellison almost appears 'love-struck', if you will. It's more than a little disconcerting," she finished, looking perplexed.

As other Sentinels added their comments, it became very obvious that they had all reacted in some way to the incomer, but had no idea as to the source of the woman's inexplicable power of attraction.

At this point, Adam Kingsley interrupted the exchange of experiences to reintroduce Dr Larson.

"I think it's reasonable to deduce that enough of the Sentinels present have had um...*interesting* encounters with, and reactions to, Detective Richardson to give a certain credence to what Gerry here has come up with. If you'll just give a brief rundown, Gerry?" and he gave the floor over to his Medical Director, who was fairly bouncing in his seat.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, my theory, and it *is* only a theory at this moment, actually occurred to me when I was reading the reports from the recent international law enforcement conference in Boston. There was a speaker there from Europe who described the remarkable results they had recorded while test-trialling a new drug developed specifically to help Sentinels and Guides who have lost their partners to reconnect with a new one rather than face a life alone on permanent dampening medication," and he proceeded to give them a brief overview of the drug's effects on the test subjects so far.

Aware that his audience was totally enthralled by his every word, he handed back the floor to Adam Kingsley to continue with explaining the conclusions at which they had tentatively arrived.

"Having become somewhat suspicious of the sudden onset of Sentinel Ellison's change in behaviour the very first day he was introduced to Detective Richardson, I did a little checking up on the new recruit, and found that she actually attended the conference as one of Tacoma PD's delegates. It appears that she attended all the seminars concerning the new drug - and here I have to admit to some fairly clandestine snooping. Anyhow, we found out that she actually ended up sleeping with one of the foreign technicians during the course of the conference. Now, we have no actual proof at this point as to whether she was able to acquire an illicit sample of the drug, but it shouldn't be too difficult to find out once you Sentinels are properly acquainted with this medication."

Here, Dr Larson opened the slim briefcase he had placed on the table, and withdrew a very small vial of viscous liquid.

"I invite you all to approach and take a *very* small sniff at this stuff," he said, only half joking. "I can assure you it is harmless to bonded Sentinels, as long as you have your own Guides with you to ground you. But having said that, I believe that, even though I am a *mundane* myself, you should all be able to catalogue the scent and use the knowledge to detect any trace on Detective Richardson or anyone else. Am I right?"

Nodding in grim agreement, the Sentinels, each maintaining a close, grounding hold on their Guides, approached one by one to sniff delicately at the open vial.

After all the pairs had taken a turn, Ralph Smithson spoke up again.

“Well, I, for one, am convinced you might well be on the right track, Dr Larson. The scent does indeed seem familiar, although I wouldn’t like to say with absolute certainty at this moment whether it was Detective Richardson on whom I smelt it. But now I know what to look for –; or, rather, scent - I just want to get on with meeting up with this woman again to prove it to my own satisfaction!”

His declaration was supported by all the other Sentinels present, so the meeting broke up shortly after with an exhortation from Director Kingsley to keep a low profile on the investigation for the time being in case it should backfire to the detriment of the Alpha pair. He was concerned for Blair in particular, as the young Guide was the more vulnerable of the two right now. As a parting shot, he bemoaned the sad fact that, under normal circumstances, the Alphas would have had no trouble in deducing what the clan was up to through the empathic link they all shared, and that absence of input was nothing if not worrying.

As the clan members left the room in various states of anger and vengeful intent, they were not to know that the potential disaster for the Alpha pair was, in fact, imminent.

The following day was, in fact, the actual anniversary of Jim and Blair’s bonding, but Blair was bitterly disappointed to find that Jim and Tonya were scheduled to relieve Rafe and H on a stake-out from 10.00pm the previous evening, so that he wouldn’t be at home until later in the afternoon.

Although he cried himself to sleep, alone in their large bed, after a restless few hours he woke in a more positive frame of mind, determined to make something of their special day, and to do his utmost to rekindle at least some of their passion; perhaps even persuading his beloved Sentinel to bond fully with him.

Having decided on his plan of action, Blair drove to Rainier to do a little more work on his papers and attend an early class, then, drawing out all of his meagre weekly allowance from the Guide payment office, he blew the lot on the fixings for a slap-up meal which he hoped Jim would appreciate.

Driving back to the loft that afternoon with his groceries piled on the passenger seat of his small car, he allowed himself to hope that the evening might turn out to be at least enjoyable, and more like their customary loving and companionable lifestyle. He even smiled a little as he thought of the tiny, but beautifully made Zuni fetish in the form of a large cat, which he had bought and stashed away for Jim especially for this occasion as a token of his love, knowing that Jim had been so thrilled with the jaguar pendant he had bought previously.

Feeling more buoyant than he had for several days now, he parked up outside 852 Prospect and made his way up to #307, arms full of grocery bags, and heartily grateful that the ancient elevator was actually working.

Wrestling the door open, and staggering in to drop the bags on the counter, he was abruptly aware that someone was already inside. Automatically opening his mind to their link, he was unsurprised to find Jim closed off from him –; something that upset him greatly, but which had become more commonplace over the last few days. However, his empathy was more than enough to warn him that another, more hostile presence was nearby, so he steeled himself to search the apartment, hoping that he would be able to use his kinetic power to defend himself should the need arise.

Trembling with nerves, he crept around the loft, checking his office under the stairs and the bathroom, then, heart in mouth, he slowly climbed the stairs to the loft bedroom.

The sight that greeted him so shocked and stunned him, that for several moments he was motionless, able only to absorb the horrifying scene before him.

Jim lay stretched out on the crumpled sheets, naked and apparently deeply asleep in obviously sated satisfaction – as evidenced by the strong smell of sex in the air. Next to him, a thoroughly debauched looking and equally naked Tonya raised herself nonchalantly on her elbow, and gazed at Blair, malicious triumph and sneering hatred in her expression.

Voice dripping with venom, she addressed him, flaying him unmercifully with her words.

“See, little man? He’s mine now, like he should have been all along. How could you possibly have believed you were meant to be bonded to an Alpha such as Jim? You’re just a cheap whore, living off the good nature of a bunch of gullible do-gooders. Perhaps I should do us all a favour and arrange an accident to get rid of you permanently? Yeah, sounds like a plan. One good shove down the stairs should do it...” and she slid slowly out of the bed to advance sinuously towards the stricken young Guide, arms rising to do just that.

Just then Blair jerked out of his terrified stupor, instantly and instinctively pushing out with all his fear and anger, and Tonya froze immediately in her tracks, hands flying to her head in agony as he threw his power at her, invading her mind.

As she dropped without a sound, Blair, horrified and devastated by the depths of their betrayal, fled the apartment. He hurtled down the stairs at break-neck speed, and sprinted off down the street towards the park, eyes streaming with tears of hurt and pain, scarcely knowing where he was going, or what he was doing.

Minutes later, breathless and sobbing, he barely registered the hands that grabbed him, abruptly halting his flight, or the sting of a hypodermic in his neck before darkness seized him. He merely dropped bonelessly into strong arms, to be bundled roughly into the back of a large

SUV which sped away down the street and out of Cascade. For the second time in his young life, Blair Sandburg was again a kidnap victim.

Part 3: Descent into Hell:

Alex, some weeks previously:

Alex Barnes, aka Alicia Bannister, Alice Baker or Anna Brown amongst many other false identities, growled in frustration as she prowled around the living room of her luxury rented apartment in Cascade's exclusive waterfront development, very much resembling the spotted jaguar who was her spirit animal. Tall, blonde and infinitely dangerous, she scrubbed at her face and arms, feeling as if she was coming out of her skin as her senses spiked or cut out despite her usual iron control.

Watching her warily from his comfortable armchair, her lover and business partner, Carl Hettinger held his tongue, knowing from experience that it would be foolish –; possibly even fatal –; to interrupt or otherwise irritate her until she was good and ready to speak.

Alex's senses were heightened to Alpha Sentinel strength, but, unlike a true Sentinel, she was completely devoid of the compulsion to protect the tribe, and had devoted her life to using her ability to pursue a life of crime, mostly with great success. Partnered with Hettinger, she had pulled off grand theft, major drug and arms deals, and even murder over the years, but, to her bitter anger and irritation, she found that she functioned far better with the grounding of a Guide.

Having said that, she had already used, burned out and discarded several unfortunate individuals who had ultimately been too weak to cope with her, and she had been forced to admit that it would take a highly-rated empath to help her gain full control.

The major problems with that situation, however, were that firstly, such individuals were as rare as Alpha Sentinels, if not rarer, and usually already bonded, protected and unavailable. Secondly, she had never wanted to be burdened with any Guide, only doing so under extreme duress. Yet she was faced with the undeniable fact that appropriating an Alpha Guide was necessary if she was to continue to enjoy the lifestyle to which she and Carl had become accustomed.

Therefore, when, like other Sentinels across the Pacific North West, she too had felt the pull of another Alpha in Cascade when Ellison had come online, unlike them, she had no desire to become part of the clan. No, what she needed was the empath with whom Ellison was bonded, and she had determined to secure him by whatever means necessary.

To that end, therefore, keeping a very low profile, she and Carl bided their time over the next few weeks, and did their research on the Alpha pairing, carefully planning on how to make the acquisition.

Alex was vastly amused on learning of Sandburg's history of abuse as a crime lord's sex slave, agreeing with Carl that the boy could turn out to be quite entertaining besides being useful. On the other hand, she was much less happy to witness the apparent depth of devotion he shared with his Sentinel, and the fact that they seemed to be joined at the hip virtually continuously, with the exception of the few hours the boy spent at Rainier University.

Having come to the conclusion that it was likely that the snatch would have to be made from the campus, which could prove to be somewhat complicated because of the likelihood of witnesses, Alex was overjoyed when her task was made so much easier with the advent of a newcomer to the PD.

She and Carl watched with unholy glee as the misguided but determined woman set her cap at Jim Ellison, wreaking havoc with his bond, and leaving the Guide vulnerable.

Keeping careful tabs on the Guide's every move, and the developing relationship between Jim and Tonya, they were more than happy to take full advantage of their good fortune when the pair returned to the loft unexpectedly for sex, to be caught *in flagrante* by the unsuspecting young empath.

It was a simple matter after his sudden and panicked exit to follow the distraught young man and bundle him into their getaway vehicle to whisk him away to Alex's cabin hidden deep in the national forest to the north of Cascade.

The instant of Blair's kidnapping, and the frantic minutes preceding it had a profound effect on more than a few people in and around Cascade, as well as upon those in the loft itself.

Although thoroughly relaxed and sated from prolonged sexual activity and surrounded by a cloud of Tonya's synthetic pheromones, nevertheless Jim was jerked rudely awake by the massive surge of power projected by his terrified Guide at the murderous woman, and, although briefly befuddled and disorientated, he threw himself from the bed crying out, "Chief! Blair! Come back! Come back, baby!" only to trip over the body of the downed detective sprawled across the floor.

"Shit, Tonya! What happened?" he muttered frantically, whilst stooping quickly to check her pulse. Finding it slow but strong, he swiftly covered her with a discarded sheet, then, quickly pulling on a pair of jeans; he grabbed the keys to his truck and sprinted down to street level where he tracked the progress of his escaping partner.

Opening up his hearing and also –; somewhat tardily – his mental link, he easily made out the sobbing breaths and hammering heartbeats as Blair ran blindly away from the loft. The scent of saline from his lover's tears wrenched at Jim's conscience as he made to follow his Guide, and Blair's deep distress hit him like a thick, black miasma.

Knowing that Blair had too much of a lead to be caught easily on foot, Jim yanked open the door to his truck, and sped off down the street as fast as possible in hot pursuit.

Unfortunately, he had delayed just too long under the circumstances, and he missed the actual snatch by vital seconds, even though he caught a glimpse of the SUV as it disappeared around a corner. Growling in fury, he floored the gas pedal, only to be struck a second time by a vivid flash of pure terror and a mental scream of anguish from Blair as he was rendered unconscious and their link was savagely broken.

Slamming his foot on the brake, he instinctively turned the truck into the kerb, where he grabbed at his head, mind cringing from the empathic assault and groaning pitifully at the horrendous pain of forced separation which sent him spiralling into a deep zone.

Throughout the PD, the Sentinel / Guide Department and elsewhere in the city, Sentinel and Guide pairs and other sensitives were hit forcibly by the repercussions from the empathic shockwave ripped from their Alpha Guide, although to a much lesser extent than his own Sentinel.

They sprang swiftly into action; Simon and the MCU were alerted, and an APB put out on the missing Guide, whilst emergency services and units were despatched to the loft.

Wasting no time, Simon drove to 852 Prospect himself, accompanied by Joel and Megan, who were in the bullpen when the call came in; to see for themselves what sort of a situation Jim and Blair had gotten themselves into now.

Arriving at the loft, they found medics working on the still unconscious body of Detective Richardson, lying in a compromising position on the bedroom floor, obviously naked beneath a hurriedly thrown sheet. Snarling in disgust at the scene, Megan reached for the woman's purse which was lying on a pile of her clothes beside the bed, and peered inside.

"Any guesses as to what this is?" she sneered, holding the bag open so that the 'perfume' spray was clearly visible.

Not wanting to jump to conclusions, but having heard a few rumours arising from the extraordinary meeting at the Sentinel / Guide Department, Simon sighed deeply at the sight of what he suspected would turn out to be damning evidence against the woman on the floor.

"I think I may have some idea," he admitted heavily. "But let's get it to forensics a.s.a.p. for confirmation, OK?" Then, addressing the EMT working on Tonya, he said, "Will you be transporting her to Cascade General?"

On receiving an affirmative, he said to Joel, "Can you see to it that she is put under guard on arrival? I know it's early days to be jumping to conclusions, but I want to be sure she's not going anywhere soon."

"Sure, Simon, I'm on it," replied Joel briskly. "But where the hell are Jim and Blair? This doesn't look good at all!"

Just as Simon was about to reply, the call came in that Jim had been located - deeply zoned and sitting in his truck a few blocks from home - and that he was being transported to the Sentinel / Guide Unit at Cascade General. Of Blair, there was no sign.

Several hours later, Tonya Richardson was still unconscious in hospital, Jim remained obstinately zoned, and Simon and everyone concerned were fretfully aware of precious time going to waste in the search for Blair.

Although other Sentinel and Guide pairs had checked out the immediate area around the truck, and Blair's lingering scent was more than adequate proof that he had been in the area, yet the frustrated Sentinels involved were unable to follow the trail further than several more blocks without a few more clues, and preferably the involvement of the young man's own partner on the hunt.

As Director Kingsley and Dr Gerry Larson had been quickly brought up to speed about the kidnapping, and also of Jim's condition, it was finally decided that they try using a combination of other Guides' input in an attempt to rouse Jim from his zone, rather than resort to potentially damaging chemical stimulants. As a result, Stephanie Smithson and Stewart Carlson - with the agreement and support of their own Sentinels - worked together, each holding one of their Alpha's hands, and after a concentrated effort on their part, Jim began to show signs of waking up.

After they were relieved by Eddy Francis and Rosie Burke, a new Guide and strong empath from Bayside precinct, Jim finally returned to full consciousness, only to demand to be released immediately so he could search for his partner.

Struggling to sit and looking round wildly for his clothes, Jim muttered brokenly, "Oh Chief! Shit! What have I done? Got to find him. *Have* to find him!"

Hardly registering the others camped out around his bed, he was finally brought up short by Simon's exasperated bellow. "Jim! *Ellison!* Settle down and listen! We have a lot to tell you, and a lot to plan if we're to track Blair down. You can't do this alone, Sentinel, even if you *think* you

can! Now SIT DOWN and let Dr Stevens check you out, then we'll tell you all we can, OK?" he finished in a gentler tone.

Gazing up at his Captain with damp, wounded eyes, Jim nodded sharply, then settled back to let Dr Stevens approach him. Recognising the sense behind Simon's words, as well as the older man's obvious personal tension, Jim realised he would have to glean every last bit of information he could if he was to rescue his beloved Guide, whom he knew instinctively he had let down so badly, even if he didn't yet know *why*.

"OK, Sentinel Ellison. Let's just check you out," murmured Dr Stevens soothingly, as he carried out a basic routine check.

"You need to know, Jim, that you have been under the influence of a very potent experimental drug –; Detective Richardson's pheromone enhancing medication –; so you will most definitely be having some minor withdrawal symptoms within the next 48 hours. The good news is that although it's addictive after prolonged exposure, your Alpha Sentinel strength has hopefully 'diluted' the effects to a certain extent. I hope that you will recognise in time that this aberrant behaviour wasn't your fault, Jim," the other man said firmly, meeting Jim's embarrassed gaze. "I'm sure you won't take any notice of whatever we tell you right now, but I hope you will bear in mind what I say when you have the time and opportunity to really analyse the last few days."

Coughing a little to ease a throat dry with emotion, Jim said, "What happened, Simon? Where's Tonya, and what do you know about her?"

Gazing at his friend with a sympathetic expression, Banks replied, "Detective Richardson regained consciousness about an hour before you did, Jim. She was pretty much incoherent with fury at being held under guard. She fully believes that she should be your Guide, Jim, and that Blair was only an aberration." Holding up his hand at Jim's automatic denial, he continued, "She freely admits to procuring an illicit sample of the experimental drug, and maintains that it merely confirmed her claim to being your bonded Guide. But she went completely ballistic when she told us what Blair had done –; putting her down with his 'voodoo' stuff when she tried to shove him down the stairs. To be honest, Jim, she's probably too far gone to convict, even of attempted murder, but we'll leave that to the judge and jury to decide. At the very least she'll be looking at spending time in a psychiatric ward."

Rubbing a hand over his face, Jim finally spoke. "I I know that what you say is probably true, Simon, but...but...I can't accept it right now, OK? I...let down my Guide! I let him suffer –; shut him out –; all because I allowed myself to be drugged into some pathetic pseudo-sexual fantasy! If I can't rescue Blair, I don't deserve to live, Simon. I *won't* live without my true Guide!"

"Jim, I can't even comprehend what you're going through right now, but I promise you there are a whole lot of people out there determined to track that young man down. Right now, this is not about you! Now, if Dr Stevens here will give us the OK, I suggest you get dressed and we get back to the PD, so we can all get our heads together to plan our course of action."

A short while later, Jim and Simon were back in the conference room at the MCU, where an inter-departmental 'task force' had been assembled to discuss how to trace and rescue Jim's Guide. The MCU was represented by Megan, Joel, Rafe and H, while all available Sentinel and Guide pairs were present, grimly determined to retrieve their Alpha Guide and support their Alpha Sentinel. Dr Larson and Adam Kingsley were also present, plus various other uniforms and personnel from other departments, and the atmosphere was heavy with tension as various participants outlined their progress –; or, rather, lack of it – so far.

Having described the meagre amount of mainly olfactory evidence which had been gleaned from examining the immediate area of the snatch, Sentinel Mary Kelly then produced an evidence bag which she handed to Jim. Inside was the broken choker and wolf pendant, obviously ripped from Blair's neck at the scene, and Jim seized the bag and opened it there and then, desperate for the scent of his beloved Guide. However, having taken a deep sniff, he reared back in disgust, much to the surprise of all present.

As he looked up at the inquisitive faces around him, Jim growled, "There's another scent here, and not of a *mundane!* Another Sentinel touched this –; Blair has been taken by an interloper! And I'm going to kill him!"

"Wait, Jim!" said Simon urgently as Jim leapt to his feet and made to storm out of the room. "You can't just go haring off on your own on the scent like some bloodhound or lone avenger! Let the others catalogue the scent also!"

Adam Kingsley added his voice to the general hubbub then, his tone commanding as he snapped out, "Jim, just hold on a moment! I've got an idea about how to gather some more information before you go off at half cock! Listen up, and then tell me what you think.

"Look, you were found at the scene, even if you missed the actual capture, right? As the nearest thing to an eye witness we have, can't you use your 'sense memory' to describe what you *did* see?"

Taking a deep, calming breath, Jim turned back to face the room, nodding slowly in thought as he forced himself to regain some form of rationality.

"Yeah, you're right," he agreed after a moment. "I can't believe I hadn't thought of that already. It's not easy without Blair to ground me, but if some of the other Guides could help –; with your permission, Sentinels –; I'm game to try!"

With all parties quickly agreeing, Stephanie Smithson and Eddy Francis sat on either side of their Alpha, and once again took his hands, offering him their combined support as he let himself sink into a light zone, attempting to recall every detail of the SUV and its occupants.

Long minutes later, Jim resurfaced, shaking his head a little against an impending headache as he addressed his spellbound audience.

"OK. Here goes. The SUV was a dark blue, late model Lexus with tinted windows. The licence plate had been covered, but I saw a rental agreement on the dash –; 'Exec-u-cars Inc.'. It's a local Cascade company. You should be able to trace who it was rented to."

Meeting Simon's gaze, Megan and Joel leapt to their feet, glad to get into action.

"We're on it, Captain! We'll get back to you as soon as we have something!" and they hurriedly left the room to chase up the flimsy lead.

Jim continued, frowning in concentration. "There were two kidnapers. The driver was a man –; large, dark, didn't see his face. The *woman* is the Sentinel!" he continued, voice dropping to a feral growl. "She had Blair in the back seat. Had her hands all over him! Tall, blonde –; I'll kill her...!"

What he didn't share was the remembered scent of Blair's extreme terror, and something that he was fancifully convinced was the sound of his lover's heart breaking.

As the other Sentinels present started to react in sympathy with their Alpha's black despair, their Guides had their work cut out to restore a modicum of calm, but finally the company settled down to agree on a course of action using the new information.

As soon as Megan and Joel returned with a name which Megan had coerced from the car hire firm's young receptionist, two Sentinel and Guide pairs, along with Rafe and H and a couple of other units, went to check out the address provided, although it was pretty much a given that there would be no one there now.

The apartment –; a luxury furnished rental in the prestigious new waterfront complex –; had been rented in the name of Anna Brown, and as expected it was empty and apparently scrupulously clean on first inspection. However, the Sentinels, knowing now what they were looking for, could catch the faint residual scent of the rogue Sentinel, and confirmed their findings to the task force.

At this point, Jim suggested contacting Jack Kelso, an ex CIA operative-turned-lecturer at Rainier. Confined to a wheelchair after being injured in the field, Kelso's exposé on the less acceptable side of the agency had earned him plus points from Jim, and he knew Blair had befriended the man also.

A short phone call extracted the promise of Kelso's full cooperation, with the man readily agreeing to follow up every lead in his considerable arsenal of contacts to dig up information on the kidnapers. As Jim paced up and down in the confines of Simon's office, declining offers of sympathy or sustenance, Kelso pulled up a substantial amount of data on the suspects in a

comparatively short space of time, and he quickly relayed the findings to the PD. As soon as the file arrived on his desk, Simon immediately updated Jim with the relevant details.

Alex Barnes, aka Anna Brown amongst various other pseudonyms, was an internationally sought-after criminal, known to have used her powerful senses in pulling off many successful and lucrative crimes in several countries, but always managing to evade capture. It was surmised that she had used, and probably disposed of, several guides during her career, but there was no actual proof to support the theory since no bodies had ever been found.

However, it was also well-known that she was accompanied by her long-time lover and partner in crime, Carl Hettinger, also known to be a ruthless and sadistic sociopath, and the perfect companion for Barnes.

As he absorbed the details, Jim grew more angry and frustrated. "Shit, Simon! This is all very well, but what else do we have? We have to have something else to go on –; some other address?"

"Hold on, Jim, let me finish! I know how you feel, man –; I'm missing that kid too –; but be patient for a moment longer, OK?"

The next moment he looked up from the file, a broad smile in place. "I think we might have something, Jim!" he said, assuming a predatory expression. "Kelso says she has a cabin in the forest outside Cascade, purchased in the name of Alicia Bannister--" and that's as far as he got before Jim exploded into action.

"That's it, Simon! Call it a gut instinct if you will, but I *know* that's where she's taken Blair! Let's get the details and get out there...!"

Possibly against his better judgement, Simon nodded in agreement.

"Your gut instinct has worked before, Jim. I'll go with that. Let's go get your Guide!"

Barnes' cabin, Cascade National Forest, some hours earlier:

As Blair slowly regained consciousness, the first things he was aware of was a feeling of faint nausea in his belly, plus a head full of cotton wool; both symptoms frighteningly reminiscent of the after-effects of being drugged by Galbini and his goons.

Nervously opening his eyes, he gazed around him to see that he was in a bare, wooden-walled and windowless room, whose only furnishings appeared to be a couple of hard-backed chairs and the lumpy bed on which he was lying.

Quickly realising that the cold he was feeling was due to being completely naked, he attempted to sit up, only to find that he was restrained with sturdy leather cuffs around wrists and ankles.

Gulping audibly in growing horror, he peered at the set-up, immediately recognising it as an arrangement with which he was all too familiar.

His arms were stretched over his head, the cuffs attached by a length of chain to a swivel bolt set in the wall above the bed, while his ankles were secured to the bottom corners of the bed with longer lengths of chain, the object of the arrangement being that he could be placed in whatever position his abusers desired. Even worse was the fact that, instead of his beautiful choker and pendant, he could feel the raw rub of a wide new leather slave collar around his neck.

Whimpering in panic, heart racing and panting in increasing terror, he muttered breathlessly, "Oh no! Nononononono! Please Jim! Come get me! Pleasepleaseplease...save me!" only to recall the events preceding his capture.

Eyes filling with bitter tears, he remembered Jim's growing disinterest in his bonded Guide as the Sentinel became more involved with Tonya, only too aware of how he himself had put the woman out of action. Although he didn't think he had killed her, despite reacting in purely instinctive self-defence, he was certain that Jim would never forgive him for attacking his new lover. If so, even if by some miracle he was rescued, Blair would be truly on his own again, with his only chance of survival dependant on either artificial suppressants or another bond -; neither of which appealed to his devastated mind.

Giving himself up to his despair, he closed his eyes and sobbed broken-heartedly for long minutes before becoming aware that he was no longer alone, and he reluctantly listened to the conversation going on beside his bed.

Male voice: "Well, he's pretty, all right. Well used, also. He must be good to play with!"

Female voice: "Hmmm, you're probably right, darling, but it won't have been Ellison who left those marks! By all accounts, before his little 'diversion' into that stupid bitch's bed, he was a soft touch. The boy's not my type, really. I don't normally go for cute and fragile, but he'll do. I know what / need for physical satisfaction, babe," (voice sinking to a throaty purr) "but you can play as much as you want as long as he still functions for me!"

Trembling violently, Blair took a deep, shuddering breath, and willed himself to open his eyes. Turning his round-eyed, terrified gaze towards the pair standing beside the bed, discussing him as dispassionately as some sort of sentient *commodity*, (which, he supposed cynically, he was -; *again*) he tentatively 'read' them, all the while expecting some sort of punishment for his audacity.

The woman -; tall, blonde and cool - was the Sentinel he had felt as he was snatched. She was regarding him speculatively with cold, calculating eyes, and he shook even harder in primeval fear.

"Yes, he'll do," she said, nodding decisively. "He's a strong empath, and not afraid to use it. Let's get on with it, then," and she closed the distance to the bed, sitting down sideways at the edge to give herself full access to Blair's shrinking flesh.

Patting his cheek with one hand, while running the other over his naked body, she looked at him calmly before addressing him directly.

"You know why you're here, Guide, so let's not waste time with unnecessary details. Your Sentinel has abandoned you in favour of some self-seeking bimbo with ideas above her station. Not surprising really, since you have nothing but your ass and your empathic ability to offer him in return for his hospitality, hey? Just the well-used cast-off of a deceased mobster, after all. Not the best catch for an Alpha of Ellison's standing, hmmm? On the other hand, I don't have the same fastidiousness. As long as you do as you're required, this doesn't have to hurt, Guide. It's what you need after all –; another bond to replace Ellison's."

So saying, she tightened her grip on his jaw, and compelled him to look at her, opening her mind to force her thoughts through his weakening empathic barriers.

Blair, however, had no intention of giving up so easily, hoping and praying that he could hold out against her mental onslaught, even though he despaired of Jim's riding to his rescue.

Frowning in frustrated irritation, Alex pinched and twisted his nipple so hard he couldn't refrain from yelping in pain.

"He's tougher than he looks, the little shit!" she snarled. "Here, you have some fun while I prepare for a more serious bonding," and she looked over her shoulder at Carl, whose dead eyes and cruel grin threatened serious pain for the young empath.

However, little did they know but only a few weeks previously, Blair had undergone some voluntary testing at the Sentinel / Guide Dept to see just how effective his projected powers actually were, and against whom. Under carefully controlled conditions, he found that his power was completely ineffectual against Sentinels, a fact that Dr Larson tentatively attributed to a primitive genetic variation which most likely was designed as a sort of 'failsafe' to prevent any suggestion of inhibiting a bond between a pre-civilised Sentinel and Guide.

Aware of the fact, Blair knew he had no defence against Barnes, but Carl was completely another matter. As the sadistic, muscle-bound behemoth approached the bed, Blair pushed out with every bit of his terror, and the man flew backwards to hit the wall with a loud thump, to sink down to his butt, shaking his head in stunned disbelief.

Glancing quickly over her shoulder to check on her lover's condition, Alex turned back to her captive, and, with a feral snarl, she backhanded Blair so hard across the face that his lip split and began to bleed freely down his chin.

Gripping him in cruel hands, she flipped him onto his front, and crossed quickly to where Hettinger was groggily climbing to his feet. "Give me your belt, baby," she said. "I'm going to teach him a lesson he'll never forget! He'll never do that again once we're bonded, I promise you!"

As Carl nodded in savage agreement, and handed over his tooled leather belt, she returned to the bed, where Blair cringed in terrified anticipation of the punishment to come.

At the first hard bite of leather across his bare buttocks, Blair cried out in pain, then tried so hard to force back any further sounds by biting hard into the tattered pillow beneath his face.

"*You,*" crack, "will NEVER," crack, "dare," crack, "to do that," crack, "*ever,*" crack, "again!" crack, crack! Alex carried on furiously in the same vein, steadily flogging Blair from the backs of his knees right up to his shoulders until his back was completely covered in darkening, bloody and painful welts over his tender skin. Giving in first to tears, then harsh sobs, pleas for mercy and cries of agony, Blair finally slipped into blessed unconsciousness as the beating continued.

Gradually becoming aware that her victim was no longer moaning and writhing in agony, Alex stopped whipping the still figure, and stood back, breathing heavily in exertion.

"We'll leave him to his sleep for now," she growled. "When he wakes, he's going to really *hurt!* And that's when we'll come back. I'll bond with the little shit then, whether he wants it or not!"

Nodding in agreement, Carl threw his arm around her waist, and they left Blair alone and bleeding in his cold prison.

Meanwhile, a few miles from the well-hidden cabin, a virtually primal Sentinel almost vibrated with pent-up fury and frustration as the small but highly effective force around him prepared for action.

Growling in hackle-raising irritation as he sensed the proximity of his rival, Jim clenched his fists, grinding his teeth so hard that Simon was convinced he would have major dental work to contend with in his near future.

Picking up on and reacting to their Alpha's tension, the Sentinels accompanying the angry man were controlled only by the calming presence of their Guides, while Detective Dan Brown, as a low-level empath and friend to both Jim and Blair, had volunteered to try to provide some sort of grounding for the intense, single-minded predator Jim was rapidly becoming.

Having located the cabin, and having gathered all available information regarding its layout and the surrounding terrain from the local police, the Cascade Task Force, consisting of several Sentinel and Guide pairs, plus members of the MCU and other volunteers from the PD like Detective Brown, made its final preparations. In a case such as this, the question of jurisdiction

simply did not arise. The clan, with the full backing of the Sentinel / Guide Department, arranged the necessary support and accepted the backup as their due.

Carefully avoiding clutching at his detective, and thus possibly triggering a violent Sentinel reaction, Simon quietly addressed Jim, saying, "Are you sure she hasn't picked up on us yet, Jim? If she has Alpha strength senses like you, couldn't she be waiting for us? Would she kill Blair rather than hand him back –; unless they're already bonded, that is..." and his voice tailed off a little at the awful thought.

Clutching tightly at his last shreds of control, Jim replied through stiff lips, jaw rigid with stress. "No, she hasn't made us yet. She may be Alpha strength, but she's still unbonded and uncontrolled. I can tell. I can feel Blair calling out to me still. He's fighting her even now. And she's hurting him! She's *dead*. She just doesn't know it yet! And that scumbag she hangs with!"

"Can you 'contact' him, let him know you're here for him?" asked Dan hopefully. "He must be so frightened!"

"No! No, I can't risk it," replied Jim, anguish saturating his tone. "I can't risk her picking up on our presence through his mind, even though I'd give anything to comfort him right now. He's closed his mind against her, and I must do the same."

Just then, Rafe and H approached to advise them that the force was in position surrounding the cabin, and that there was no escape route left unobserved.

"Right! Let's get on with this!" muttered Simon, knowing that the Sentinels needed no radio contact and would relay his orders as necessary. "Move in!" and the force approached swiftly and silently through the trees.

Back in the cabin, Alex and Carl sipped at cups of coffee in the tiny kitchen, smiling knowingly at each other in the aftermath of their energetic coupling.

Dressed now in robes to cover their nakedness, they exchanged smug grins recalling the passionate embraces in which they had indulged, both of them having been incredibly titillated by Blair's abuse, and the prospect of more to come.

Putting down her coffee cup, Alex cocked her head, purring contentedly, "Well now, I think the little Guide is awake. Time to finish this. Don't worry, darling," she added, covering Carl's hand with her own. "You can play with him as soon as I'm done. But no permanent damage, OK? I need him fully functioning, and we need to be able to get away from here as soon as possible. I think we've been around Cascade far too long already!" and she rose from the table and returned to the small bedroom-cum-prison, her lover close behind.

Moaning in agony, his back and buttocks hot and throbbing in relentless pain, Blair gradually regained consciousness, only to wish fervently that he could retreat once again into the security of oblivion. Hurting more than he had in many months, almost as much as he had suffered in Galbini's hands, he whimpered softly, mind automatically reaching out for the only source of comfort he knew –; the love of his Sentinel.

'Oh Jim, please, please forgive me! Please come for me! Don't let her take me, Jim!' his pain and fear cried out for succour he was sure would not come.

When Alex and Carl entered the room, he cried out in terror, anticipating the trial to come at the evil pair's hands. He cringed and moaned when a rough grip flipped him over onto his sore back, and then Alex straddled his waist, both cold hands gripping the sides of his face firmly as she forced his frightened gaze to meet her cold and angry one.

Peripherally aware that Carl was pushing his thighs apart to gain access to his most private parts, Blair pulled the tattered shreds of his barriers together, and made one final effort to protect his mind, knowing that he couldn't allow himself to be used by this wicked aberration of a Sentinel. Finally accepting that his beloved Jim was better off without him, he gathered together all his hurt and his despair and centred the power directly into his own mind, retreating deep into a hidden recess where nothing could touch him any longer.

Screaming in rage, Alex realised what he had done, feeling the abrupt closing off of the empath's mind. Slapping his face again and again, she shouted out, "You little bastard! Wake up! Come back, you shit! Bond with me! *Bond with me!*"

Distracted by his lover's extreme reaction, Carl, like Alex, failed to register the approaching force, or even hear the crashing of the shattered cabin door until it was way too late, and the tiny room seemed to fill with a tide of furious Sentinels.

Swiftly overcome by Mary Kelly and Mick Kavanagh and their Guides, Carl Hettinger was cuffed and dragged out of the room before he could barely comprehend the intrusion, while a feral Alex snarled in bitter fury as she turned at bay to face her equally feral rival, Alpha Sentinel Ellison, who stalked her with death in his eyes.

Leaping off the bed, hands outstretched like claws, Alex attacked first, to lock in mortal combat with her foe.

Wrestling together in spitting and scratching ferocity like two large cats, they were left to their private contest by the others, who cleared out of their way, except for keeping a watchful eye on the bed where the injured Guide lay motionless.

Moments later, the fight finished abruptly as Jim's hands found and savagely snapped his rival's neck, dropping the lifeless body at his feet with a roar of triumph. Breathing deeply, he gradually shook himself out of his primal mindset, only to snap back to harsh reality when he looked over at the still figure on the cot.

"Oh God! Oh, Blair, baby! What did she do to you?" he moaned as he scooped the cold body into his arms. Growling in anger, he began to undo the cuffs restraining the beloved body, while Dan Brown, kindly face suffused with horror at the scene, helped with those around Blair's tethered ankles.

Once freed from the sadistic shackles, Blair was settled on Jim's lap, wrapped in a blanket with his face tucked into a broad shoulder, while the EMTs who had accompanied the task force gently checked him over, knowing that his Sentinel would have already scanned him for serious internal injury.

Having seen to Hettinger's transport to Cascade and the removal of Alex Barnes' body, Simon carefully approached the pair on the small cot, saying quietly, "How is he, Jim? What can I do?"

He was more than horrified when his detective turned moist, sorrowing eyes towards him, whispering brokenly, "He's gone, Simon!"

Immediately assuming the worst, Simon gasped, "Jesus! Oh Jim, I'm so sorry! I thought his injuries were mostly superficial! When did he go?"

Shaking his head sadly as he realised what Simon meant, Jim replied, "No, Simon. He's not dead –; not physically, that is. No, he's gone, retreated into his own mind. And I don't know if I'll ever get him back!"

Part 4: Take the long way home:

Several days after his Guide's rescue, Jim took Blair home to the loft, the young Guide having been discharged from the Sentinel / Guide Unit at Cascade General Hospital. His injuries had healed well, although his back and buttocks sported vividly coloured, if fading bruises, and his lip still looked tender and puffy.

He had submitted to various tests and gentle questioning with equanimity, allowing himself to be handled and treated without complaint, and he was worrying his carers and Sentinel almost to distraction.

Sighing as he carefully ushered the slight figure into the loft, Jim closed the door behind them, and turned back to look at his Guide, for Guide he still was, at least superficially.

Completely obedient and passive, Blair had yet to speak one word, or show any sign of returning to anything resembling normality: basically, lights were on, but nobody was home, and Jim's guilt knew no bounds.

Although his Guide's mere physical presence was enough to ground Jim's senses on a day-to-day basis, the bond he so desperately wanted was impossible with Blair locked away so deeply in his own mind that Jim despaired of ever breaching the protective walls to free his partner's

spirit, even as he questioned his right to do so, considering his own part in driving the young man to such an extreme act of mental self-destruction in order to prevent being used by a criminally insane rogue Sentinel.

He had talked long and hard with Director Kingsley, Dr Larson, and Simon, as well as with his friends and colleagues when time permitted. Even so, despite the fact that he was constantly exhorted to believe that he had had no chance of fighting Tonya Richardson's drugs, and that the awful consequences were down to her and her alone; yet Jim felt that, as an Alpha, and Blair's true bonded partner and lover, he *should* have been strong enough to resist her wiles, and not acted like some love-sick sap, led around by his dick.

Sighing again, he took Blair's unresisting hand and led him over to the couch, where he carefully seated the young man, who gazed blankly at the floor in front of his feet, mind turned in on itself, and thinking the gods only knew what.

"I'll fix us some tea, Chief," Jim said quietly, tipping Blair's face up towards him with a gentle finger under his chin. "Then we'll get you ready for bed, OK, babe?"

Blair simply gazed back at him, no spark of recognition in his wide blue eyes, before the blank blue orbs slipped away again to contemplate the floor once more.

Over the next few days, they fell into a routine of sorts, as Jim washed, fed and dressed his Guide, soaping up the slight figure with infinite care, and, come night time, cuddling the quiescent body close in their big bed while silent tears dripped onto soft curls as his lover slept on unperturbed.

Every other day, Jim drove his Guide over to the Sentinel / Guide Department or to the Specialist unit at Cascade General so that Blair could be checked out and his progress, or rather, the lack of it, could be monitored. On each occasion, Blair gazed around him calmly, with no sign of interest or real awareness, going through his paces like an automaton, and totally unresponsive to the others' questions and emotions; his condition remaining, to all intents and purposes, like a walking coma.

Nevertheless, Adam Kingsley was of the firm impression that Jim should take his partner back into the office on a part-time basis, with Simon's full approval, to see if the atmosphere of the bullpen and the interactions of his friends could awaken some spark of interest in Blair. Although he would naturally be confined to desk duty for the foreseeable future, Adam felt that Jim needed some distraction away from his self-imposed duty as full-time carer within the loft, and that Blair would come to no harm, even if he showed no sign of improvement.

Having discussed his theory with Jim, and knowing that the next move would have to come from the Sentinel himself, yet Adam felt justified in broaching the subject, and even a little hopeful that something would eventually come of it.

Unsure of his own reaction, but grateful for the suggestion, Jim promised to think on the idea, and drove Blair home that evening in a slightly lighter frame of mind.

The following morning, having thought long and hard about Adam's proposal, Jim washed and dressed Blair in his favourite comfortable clothes, before placing a plate of eggs and toast in front of the quiet young man.

"There you go, babe –; eat up!" he ordered gently, and, uncomplaining, Blair did as he was told, until he was satisfied and pushed his plate away.

Leading his smaller partner to the bathroom to complete his ablutions as directed, Jim kept up his one-sided conversation, telling Blair of his plans for the day, and that they would be dropping into the PD for a few hours to see what was going on with their friends. Of course, Blair made no response, but Jim remained upbeat, buoyed up with the prospect of getting back to some sort of regular work routine, and looking forward to sitting at his desk, even if it turned out to be covered in paperwork.

A short while later, Jim pulled the truck into the parking garage at the PD, and led his Guide to the elevator to travel up to the sixth floor. Compliant and unresponsive, Blair was unmoved by the looks of sympathy and outright pity cast in his direction as they passed, but Jim found himself grinding his teeth in frustration even as he understood his fellow workers' attitudes and reactions.

Tucking the young man more firmly under his arm, Jim pushed his way into the bullpen, where a rapturous welcome greeted the pair.

Megan, glancing up from her desk at their arrival, flew across the room with a squeal of joy, only to pull up short before hugging the stuffing out of Blair, worried that she might frighten him.

"Hey, Jimbo! Good to see you, mate!" she said, voice wavering slightly, and a suspicion of moistness in her eyes. Then, gently tipping Blair's face up to hers, she said softly, "Hi kiddo! Looking good, Hon! Jim's been taking good care of you, hasn't he?" and she dropped a kiss on his forehead as he gazed up at her, eyes wide but vacant before they slid away again.

"Good to see you too, Conner!" said Jim, with a sad grin. "It's nice to be back," he added, as Joel patted his shoulder before carefully hugging Blair, and Rafe and H came over to join them, while nearly all of the others in the bullpen either called out their own greetings, or came over to shake Jim's hand and ruffle his Guide's curls in gentle affection.

Once seated in his usual chair, Blair looked up to see Rhonda arrive in front of him, hot chocolate and cookies at the ready, which she placed on his desk.

"There you go, my dear," she said softly. "Eat up and enjoy!"

Blair, doing as he was told as always, sipped the chocolate and nibbled experimentally at the cookies, while Rhonda looked on with a watery smile.

"He'll be OK, Jim, I'm sure of it!" the kindly woman said, mellow voice full of conviction as she squeezed Jim's shoulder in comfort. "It'll just take a while for him to find his way back to us."

"Thanks, Rhonda," replied Jim feelingly. "I have to believe it. It's inconceivable that he'll always be like this. But I'll never let him go, even if this is as good as he gets," he added vehemently. "He'll always have a home with me!"

"I know, dear, I know," agreed Rhonda gently as she returned to her office, once again cursing the day Detective Tonya Richardson ever set foot in their department.

A few minutes later, Simon arrived, having spent the morning in a tedious meeting with the Chief and Commissioner. With a huge smile breaking out over his face, he approached his best detective and the young man quietly nibbling the last of his cookies, and said quietly, "Jim, my man, it's so good to see you! And Blair! I knew that Adam had talked to you about coming back, but I wasn't sure you would make it just yet. Come to my office, and bring Blair with you. We can catch up a bit on what needs to be done. There's plenty to keep you occupied," he continued, even as Jim turned to follow him to his office, carefully steering his Guide around the desks *en route*. "The paperwork hasn't diminished any, but there are actually a few cases which would benefit from your insight, even from your desk," he finished enthusiastically, although his smile dimmed a little at Blair's complete lack of response.

"Sit down, you two. Coffee? Rhonda's prepared a fresh pot, bless her!"

Nodding in response, Jim accepted a cup of Simon's special brew, and pressed half a mug into Blair's hand with a small smile, waiting until the young man took a couple of tentative sips before turning back to his Captain, who had watched the interaction with a slightly sorrowful smile.

"How is he really, Jim? Has there been any improvement at all?"

Sighing and shaking his head, Jim replied, "No, Simon, not really. I mean, he's perfectly obedient, no trouble at all to care for, but I can't say if he's even content. There's just, well, *nothing!* Our link simply isn't there anymore, and I have absolutely no idea if it ever will be again. We hurt him so badly, Simon, Tonya and I. And I didn't even realise it, I was so pussy-blind!" he finished, self-disgust uppermost in his voice and expression.

"Now, Jim, I've said this before, and I know very well I'm not the only one. You can't do him any favours by holding on to this self-destructive guilt, man! Cut yourself some slack, put the blame on the bitch where it belongs, and let's see how young Blair progresses with his hours in the bullpen. I for one am sure it can only do him good! Now, take these files, have a good look

through them, and tell me what you come up with. Your instincts - and Blair's also, to tell the truth - have always been worth taking note of!"

With that, he showed the pair out with a friendly pat on the shoulder for Jim, and a gentle ruffling of Blair's curls, which met with nary a change in the young Guide's expression.

Life, such as it was, went on. Jim gradually became, if not exactly content with his lot, at least more resigned to it, such that the Sentinel and the new variation of mute, introspective but sweet-tempered and easy-going Guide became an accepted item in the bullpen.

The breakthrough, when it came, was sudden and completely unexpected, although, in retrospect, Jim supposed it shouldn't have surprised him so much.

Thanksgiving this year had come and gone, with Jim taking his Guide into the PD for a few hours of diverting work rather than sit in the loft remembering the previous year's happy day. It had been their first celebration together and Jim had still had much to learn about his shy and reticent young partner, so he had been thrilled to find that Blair loved to cook, and was damned good at it.

As Jim studied the reports on his desk, he couldn't help but smile wryly as he recalled watching Blair's antics in the kitchen as he prepared their turkey dinner with all the trimmings, complete with home-made -; and entirely delicious -; chestnut stuffing.

As he glanced over at the quiet young man sitting almost motionless beside him, he suddenly remembered that he should have an important package being delivered very shortly.

When Alex Barnes had snatched Blair, she had torn his much-prized choker and wolf pendant from his neck, in order to replace it with her own slave collar. When it had been found at the scene, it had been badly broken, so Jim had been tempted to try and find a replacement once he had Blair back. However, knowing that it had meant so much to his Guide, and having ensured that he had obliterated the rogue sentinel's scent with his own, he finally sent it back to the small, Native American trading company from which he bought it, hoping that the maker could repair it for him.

Sure enough, a couple of days after Thanksgiving, there was a knock on the door as they were getting ready to go in to the office, Blair, as usual, sitting quietly on the couch waiting to be led down to the truck.

Thanking the delivery man and taking the small package in his hands, Jim was of two minds whether to open it then and there, or to wait until they returned that evening.

Suddenly deciding that he couldn't wait to see how the choker looked, he carefully opened the padded envelope and peeled back the tissue paper to reveal the repaired choker, looking as good as new.

Out of practice with reading changes in his Guide's demeanour, Jim was a couple of seconds late in realising that Blair's heart rate had suddenly increased, and the sharp intake of breath warned him that the young man was reacting to some stimulus at long last.

Quickly turning to face Blair, he was amazed to see his Guide approaching tentatively but spontaneously, a look of bemused wonderment on his face. Reaching out a shaking finger to touch the necklace in Jim's outstretched hand, Blair's eyes suddenly widened in shock as wave after wave of buried memories assaulted him, coming thick and fast as he clutched at his head and whimpered in pain.

"Blair, baby! What is it?" cried Jim in real fear, only to halt in his tracks at the devastated, and totally aware, expression etched on the beloved face.

Gazing at Jim, eyes full of misery, Blair finally broke down in floods of tears and heart-rending sobs as his protective amnesia was swept away and he was left open and vulnerable to his demons.

Reacting instinctively, Jim pulled his Guide close, cuddling and stroking the shaking body in an effort to calm his distraught partner.

Pulling back slightly, he cupped the beautiful face in his large, gentle hands, trying to wipe away the streams of tears with his thumbs. Attracting Blair's unwilling attention with a small but firm shake, he said softly first, then with increasing insistence, "Blair, link with me! You need it, baby! Hell, / need it! Come on, babe, you can do it –; LINK WITH ME! **MY** Guide! Only mine!"

Unable to deny his Sentinel's demand, but completely unable to control his tumbling thoughts and emotions, Blair opened his mind to Jim, knowing instinctively that he needed his Sentinel's strength and stability to see him through his emotional crisis.

As for Jim, although he had believed that he was prepared for his Guide's turbulent thoughts, he was thoroughly taken aback by the maelstrom he was forced to witness first hand.

As a helpless bystander, he was forced to confront Blair's gradual metamorphosis from a hopeful, happy trust in his Sentinel's love and support to bolster his own fragility – a trust which allowed him to carefully nurture his nascent confidence and belief in 'fairy tale' endings – through the ensuing stages of hurt, pain and disillusion as Jim and Tonya's treatment of him stripped away little by little his hard-won self-esteem.

At the harsh revelation of the final culmination of unutterable anguish and bitter grief at their ultimate betrayal, Jim was finally forced to face up to the depths of his unwitting culpability. Blair had been abandoned, bereft and vulnerable to Alex's attack, with no hope of love or

comfort, and left with no alternative but to shut himself down, burying his very essence so deep within his own mind that nothing and no one could use or hurt him.

Recognising and understanding the sheer extent of damage done to his Guide, drugs notwithstanding, and almost overcome by guilt, Jim pulled his lover close, tucking the curly head into his shoulder, where Blair sobbed, shuddering and clinging so tightly to Jim's shirt with clenched fists that his fingers cramped with the strength of his desperate grip.

Because he knew that Blair was way too distraught to deal with any extra emotional input from his Sentinel, Jim forced himself to control his own thoughts and feelings, concentrating hard on projecting calm, comfort and support, even though he was well aware that he was going to have his own melt-down very soon. And sure enough, despite his best efforts, he was unable to hold back the tears that ran freely down his face to dampen the curly head beneath his chin.

Some while later the pair was to be found stretched out on the couch, closely entwined.

As Blair had finally cried himself to an exhausted sleep, Jim had manoeuvred him comfortably into position, half lying on Jim's long body, and half tucked into the back of the couch, where Jim could maintain his protective and comforting hold on the precious body.

Although he had only managed a few moments of much-needed rest for himself, Jim was instantly aware of the moment Blair started to rouse, and smiled gently at the troubled gaze which met his as his Guide shyly raised his tousled head from its pillow on Jim's broad chest.

Pink with embarrassment, Blair made an effort to speak, only to find his throat dry, and his voice rusty from disuse.

Knowing immediately what the problem was, Jim spoke first, saying, "It's OK, Chief. Don't try to talk yet. I'll get us some tea and bring it over so just make yourself comfy for a bit, OK? Think you need the bathroom now?" he added, unconsciously checking his Guide's condition.

Nodding in response, Blair quickly slid off the couch and scurried, head down, to make use of the facilities, and splash some cold water on his tear-streaked and puffy-eyed face.

Making a deliberate effort to refrain from negative comment, Jim busied himself making the tea, and adding honey to Blair's cup to ease what had to be a seriously dry and painful throat.

A little later still found the pair sipping their tea together in silence, each wrapped up in his own thoughts, but uncomfortably aware that avoiding their talk would soon cease to be an option.

Putting his cup down carefully, and clearing his throat somewhat experimentally, Blair straightened his thin shoulders in unconscious bravado and began, unaware that his quiet courage was having a profound effect on his Sentinel, who found his own throat tightening in pride and love at the young man's determination.

"Th thank you for taking care of me, Jim," he began timidly in a rusty whisper. "I didn't expect to h h have a b b breakdown like that. I didn't mean to, I swear!" Not seeing Jim's automatic gesture of denial, he continued, wanting to get his explanation over and done with so he could face up to what he was sure would be the dire consequences of his behaviour and actions.

"I'm so sorry to have put Detective Richardson out of action like that. I know she means a lot to you, and it was foolish of me to be upset when you chose her, but I truly thought she was going to attack me, and I was so hurt when I saw you both in bed. I I mean, I know I can't compete with a beautiful woman like that, and she was right -; I *am* only a crime-lord's ex-plaything. Alex said the same, but she...she said she wasn't so fastidious..." and here his voice tailed off while a few more silent tears tracked down his cheeks to drip off his chin onto his clasped hands.

Although he had schooled himself to silence to let his Guide talk freely, Jim couldn't hold his tongue any longer as Blair withdrew into himself in shame and guilt.

"Oh no, baby! Oh no! You don't get to talk like that without me explaining my side, honey. You couldn't be more wrong, baby, but I don't yet know how I'm going to be able to convince you," and here he moved over to sit beside Blair, before quickly turning the young man in his arms and pulling him onto his lap, where he cuddled the smaller body close.

"Please listen to me now, baby, and feel free to read me. You'll be able to tell that I'm not lying, even as I could tell you meant every word you just said, however mistaken your beliefs.

"Firstly, I promise you that our bond still means everything to me. I know I hurt you so badly I can hardly bear to think about it, but there are reasons, which you won't be aware of yet, as you've been locked away inside yourself for so long.

"I'm not even going to try to make excuses on my own behalf, Chief, because whatever anyone else says, / believe I should have picked up on the problem straight away -; I'm supposed to be an Alpha after all -; but suffice it to say I was taken in the same as everyone else. I need to tell you a story about an ambitious, hard-nosed bitch of a Detective and her illegal drugs..." and he proceeded to do just that, making no excuses for himself or pulling any punches.

Blair listened in horrified silence to his Sentinel's story, feeling deep hurt and anger on his lover's behalf, and, for a fleeting moment, shocking himself with the depth of his wish that he had actually killed the scheming and murderous woman.

When Jim finally wound down, Blair raised his head from where he had tucked it into Jim's neck, and met his Sentinel's gaze, eyes round and bright, and full of love, sympathy and also, to Jim's surprise, self-disgust.

"Gods, I'm so sorry, Jim. So sorry I didn't realise! I mean, you said you think you should have known, but surely, so should I? If I wasn't such a wimp, I wouldn't have let her intimidate me. I should have run with my instincts, and I could have helped. I'm such a waste of space. I can't

understand why I was given such gifts of empathy if I can't use them effectively! Why do you even bother with me?" and he hung his head in humiliation.

Tangling his hand in the rich curls, Jim pulled his lover's head back up so he could lock gazes with the hurting young man.

"I love you, Chief, because you are the most loving, courageous and beautiful person I have ever had the privilege of knowing. You have overcome trauma and hurt that would have killed lesser men, even on my behalf, and you still come back for more. We are a matched pair, baby -; Alpha Sentinel and Guide - and it'll take more than a Tonya Richardson to ruin that. This was hard, baby -; harder than anything we should ever have had to deal with - but we've come through. I want to convince you of that, and also that my love and need for you is still just as strong. Will you let me take you to bed and prove it?"

Hope sparking deep in his beautiful blue eyes, Blair bit his lip and nodded slightly in agreement. "Yes, please Jim. Please take me -; I need you so much, and I need to bond fully with you."

Smiling gratefully in response, Jim slid his warm bundle of Guide off his lap to stand before him then, taking him by the hand, he led the young man upstairs where he stripped the slender body with murmurs of love and appreciation.

Laying the compliant young man on the bed, he swiftly shed his own clothes, and after gently preparing his Guide, he lifted Blair onto his lap in their position of choice, and encouraged his lover to ride him to mutual completion, where the bond burst bright and joyous, healing and strengthening the pair until they collapsed in sated contentment.

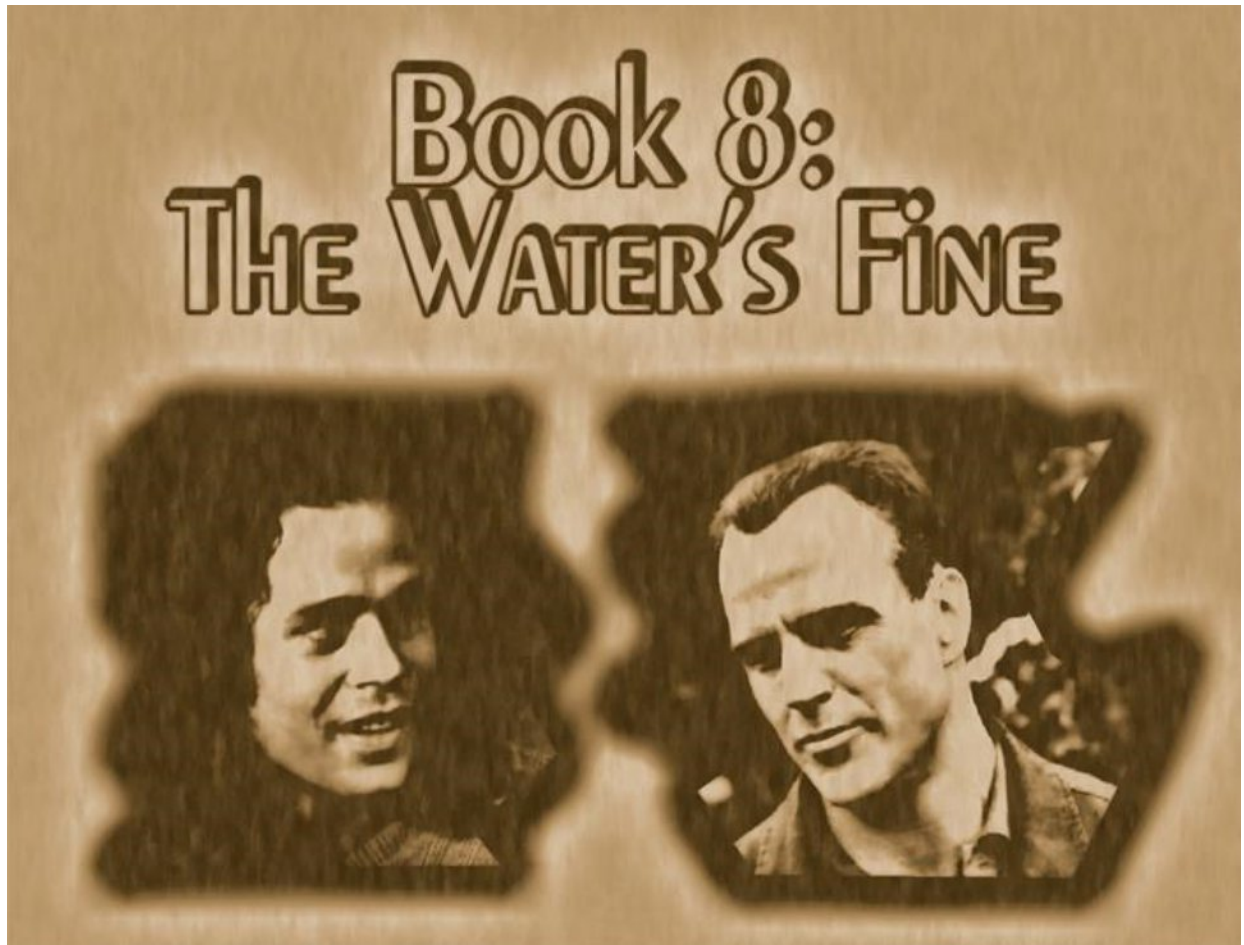
In the warm afterglow of their love-making, after Jim had quickly done a cursory clean-up with the wipes they kept handy on the nightstand, Jim reached over to the package he had had the forethought to bring up with them.

Kissing his beloved Guide on the tip of the sleepy young man's nose, which had the desired effect of eliciting a happy giggle, he drew out the repaired choker and held it out saying, "Can I put this back on you, baby? I still think of it as a symbol of our love and trust, and I'd dearly like for you to wear it again."

Sitting up eagerly and leaning forwards so that Jim could fasten the beautiful piece round his neck once again where it belonged, Blair whispered, "Thank you, Jim. This means so much to me."

"Forever and always, baby," replied Jim, with feeling.

And Blair, because he wanted so very much to believe Jim, determined then and there to dedicate the rest of his life in trying to do just that.



The Water's Fine

Major Crimes Unit bullpen:

Jim pushed open the bullpen doors and headed towards his desk, a pre-occupied expression on his handsome face. He ran a finger around the inside of his shirt collar in an absent-minded effort to loosen the irritatingly restricting garment which threatened to chafe the sensitive skin of his neck. He had just returned from a morning spent at court, and was dressed accordingly, in a well-cut formal suit, dress shirt and tie. Although he wore the garments with the unconscious ease of the moneyed classes, and was oblivious of the admiring glances his impressive figure inevitably drew, he would have preferred to be more comfortable in his more usual, relaxed attire, especially as he didn't have the benefit of his Guide's presence right now to ground his senses and help him to ease the discomfort of the itchy collar.

He was distracted in his progress across the bullpen by a friendly greeting and question from Megan, who addressed him in her usual forthright manner.

"Hey, Jimbo! Don't you scrub up well, mate! I nearly didn't recognise you. Where's Sandy? He having a morning at the U?"

Crossing over to his colleague's desk, Jim grinned a little ruefully down at the attractive brunette. He had grown unexpectedly fond of the Aussie Inspector –; probably due to Blair's influence on the pair of them –; and was no longer as quick to react negatively to her frequently abrasive comments. He recognised she was a great cop, and a good person underneath the bravado, and he was glad that she had decided to stay in the US now that her term as an exchange officer had expired.

"Hey, Connor. Yeah, Blair's taking advantage of my being in court to grab a few extra hours at Rainier. He's pretty much finished his papers for his Master's in Forensic Anthropology and Criminology, and just wanted to go over them one last time before submitting them.

"If he gets them –; and there's no reason why he shouldn't –; he'll have three Masters Degrees under his belt. Not too shabby for someone who's only twenty three, huh?"

"Blimey, you're right, Jimbo. Three MAs! Oh my word! And considering how many interruptions and set-backs the poor little fella's had over the past couple of years, it's an amazing feat."

However, seeing the effect her words had on Jim, she back-tracked quickly, upset that she'd obviously hurt the other man.

"Bloody hell, Jim, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that. Not getting at you or anything, love. I know it's been hard for you too, so take no notice of me. You know me. Opening my mouth before my brain gets into gear," and she reached over to squeeze his forearm comfortingly.

Accepting her apology, and knowing that he was being over-sensitive, Jim grinned again, albeit somewhat sadly.

"It's OK, Megan. I know you didn't mean any harm. It's just that you're right, and Blair has had far too much to deal with in too short a period of time. The fact that he continues to function at all sometimes gives me pause for thought, and it amazes me how he can fit so much into each day. On the other hand, I have to admit that it worries me. He's like the energiser bunny on speed.

"But if I were to ask him to slow down, he'd probably take it as a criticism, and only work harder to please me. It's something I'm working on, but I can't for the life of me think of a way to convince him otherwise."

"I understand, Jimbo, and if it's any consolation, we all sympathise and have agreed to try not to impose on Sandy's good nature while he's here and pile more work into his willing hands!

"Anyway," she continued briskly. "How did it go this morning? It was the Malone case wasn't it? Did you put the bugger away?"

Smiling more easily at the change of subject, Jim replied, "Yep! He's going down for a long stretch, so he won't be pimping underage kids any more. In fact, knowing how the other inmates in Starkville feel about child abuse, if he ever sets foot in General Population, he won't last long.

"And it couldn't happen to a nicer guy," he added in grim satisfaction, his disgust at the criminal low-life plain to see in his suddenly harsh expression.

Gazing speculatively at her colleague, Megan tipped her head on one side as she considered his steely-eyed but triumphant glare.

"Good on you, Jimbo. The Sentinel strikes again –; along with his faithful companion," she added, without a hint of sarcasm.

"And talking of the faithful companion, is Sandy coming in this afternoon?"

Relaxing again, Jim smiled happily this time. "Yeah. He'll be here in an hour or so, then we're going for lunch, so you and Rhonda can spoil him rotten again once we're back."

"No worries mate! Looking forward to it!" and Megan winked cheekily at him before turning back to her work.

Reaching his desk, Jim sat down, finally giving in and loosening his tie and unbuttoning the top button of the hated shirt collar. He shrugged out of his suit coat and hung it carefully over the back of his chair before pulling the first of several files newly arrived in his in-tray towards him. But although he appeared to be studying it intently, he allowed his mind to wander for a while as he contemplated recent developments in his life with his beloved Guide. A life which, although apparently successful and eminently satisfactory in the eyes of the world in general, had developed barely-acknowledged undercurrents which were beginning to trouble him greatly.

It was September already, and the second anniversary of their bonding was rapidly approaching. Jim desperately wanted to have some sort of celebration to show Blair how much he was loved, particularly as their first anniversary had been a disaster. He cringed internally as he thought back to the previous October, when he had fallen in thrall to wannabe guide, Detective Tonya Richardson. He knew that the devious and manipulative bitch had used an illicit drug to tie him to her, and his head –; and everyone else, including Blair –; told him that it wasn't his fault. But in his heart he still couldn't forgive himself for allowing it to happen, particularly in the light of the terrible damage it wreaked on his true Guide. A young man who had already suffered too much in his short life, and who didn't deserve the extra pain.

Effectively abandoned by his Sentinel, Blair had been left vulnerable and open to attack from another rogue Sentinel, who had tried to force a bond with him. He had been beaten and

traumatised to such an extent that he had been forced to withdraw into his own mind in order to protect himself from her. And once released, when he had finally emerged from several weeks of self-induced amnesia, he had been almost as anxious and shaky as he had been when Jim had first rescued him from Galbini's clutches.

Yes, they had reaffirmed their bond, and Blair had gradually recovered much of his former trust in Jim, but the Sentinel knew that his Guide's smiles and words of reassurance were just a little too brittle and overly vehement, the young man trying too hard to convince his Sentinel that all was well. And there was an edge of desperation to Blair's enthusiastic responses during bonding and love-making that pierced Jim's heart.

Not only that, but it had taken several more weeks until Blair felt confident enough to leave Jim's side for long enough to return to Rainier. On his first day back just after the Christmas break, he had nearly had a full-scale panic attack the moment he set foot in his small office. He had been so frightened that Jim had felt his terror through their link and had rushed back to comfort and console him, which in its turn had caused his Guide no little embarrassment and shame despite his obvious gratitude. After that, Blair had forced himself to resume his private tutoring sessions and Research Assistant's duties again, but the effort involved was painful for Jim to witness.

On the plus side, Dr Eli Stoddard, Blair's employer and mentor, had returned early from his extended expedition to Borneo, and his presence and support had helped Blair enormously. Blair had thrown himself back into doing both Eli's work and his own studies such that he had made up the lost ground in record time. Eli was more than satisfied with Blair's output on his behalf, and was well impressed with the progress the young man had made on his own papers.

However, again the effort had taken its toll on the young man, and his life had become even more frenetic as he had no intention of neglecting his Sentinel either. Jim knew he had no cause for complaint when it came to Blair's dedication to duty as Guide and lover, but he could and did worry that Blair was pushing himself to breaking point.

There was also additional pressure in that, as an Alpha Guide and partner to Cascade's Alpha Sentinel, Blair had responsibilities to the Sentinel / Guide Department and to the other members of the unofficial 'Cascade Clan', many of whom were in the PD. And, of course, Blair being Blair, it wouldn't have occurred to him to try to delegate any of said responsibilities onto other shoulders, however willing.

And worst of all as far as Jim was concerned, was that whereas before the Richardson incident they had been growing closer during bonding, with Blair gradually becoming bolder in his 'reading' of Jim's inner thoughts, now he was once again nervous and unwilling to pry where he imagined he wasn't welcome. Not only that, but he had begun to deliberately block off a good portion of his own thoughts and feelings, believing that it wasn't fair to inflict his personal demons on Jim. He was convinced that the Sentinel had enough on his plate without having to

constantly comfort and reassure a damaged Guide, and nothing Jim had said or done so far had persuaded him otherwise.

Jim's greatest fear was that one day soon Blair was going to crack under the strain of trying to juggle so many balls both in terms of work obligations and mental stress, and all Jim could do was hope and pray that he would be up to the task of putting his Guide back together again once that happened.

Suddenly he was roused from his contemplation by the distant sounds of his Guide's arrival at the PD. Cocking his head in a 'listening' pose, he tracked the young man's progress up from the parking garage, relieved that he sounded no more stressed than had become the norm of late. Then again, Jim was well aware that, although Blair sounded happy enough as he chatted to several people on his way, to sentinel ears his laughter was just that little bit too forced, and Jim knew that when he entered the bullpen, the young man's eyes and smile would be just that bit too bright. If nothing else, the empath was adept at obfuscation when he was trying to avoid worrying others, and his acting ability was approaching virtuoso standards.

Sure enough, when Blair breezed through the doorway, his eyes alighted immediately on Jim, and the flicker deep within the beautiful blue depths told Jim that Blair knew he'd been made. Jim could also detect the faintest hint of fear in his Guide's enticing scent, and yet another tiny but sharp splinter of pain stabbed his heart.

Nevertheless, Jim was only too glad to receive an armful of Guide as Blair approached swiftly, arms outstretched to reciprocate as Jim hugged the smaller body to him. He felt the immediate relaxation of tense muscles as Blair melted against him in relief, and opened their link to offer comfort and support which was gratefully received by his Guide, at least for a short while. All too soon, however, Blair pulled back a little, his eyes telegraphing an apology which Jim didn't want or need.

"Hey, kiddo, everything OK?" Jim's query was gentle but sincere as he met Blair's slightly anxious gaze. "The court case is a wrap," he continued, "so we can grab some lunch and relax a bit before tackling these new case files. Where would you like to go?"

"Um, I don't mind, Jim," Blair replied immediately. "Anywhere you want -; except Wonderburger, that is!" he added with a brave attempt at cheerful banter. It was a pity that Jim could tell how contrived the good humour was, although there was no way he would make anything of it and cause his lover unnecessary discomfort.

Instead he simply offered Blair a reassuring grin and answered playfully, "Aww, Chief, and here I was looking forward to some grease and saturated fat! You're no fun at all!"

And then he could have cursed aloud when the innocent comment completely backfired on him and Blair took it the wrong way. For a moment the young man's expression was stricken before

he swallowed hard and muttered contritely, "I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean to criticise your choice. If you want to go to Wonderburger, that's OK by me."

Nonplussed for a few seconds, Jim shook himself, then reached for his suit coat. Quickly pulling it on, he wrapped an arm around Blair's shoulders, ushering him gently back out into the corridor. He needed to defuse the unwanted tension and misunderstanding, but the middle of the bullpen was no place in which to do it.

"Come on, Junior," he murmured encouragingly. "Let's find somewhere we both approve of, want to?" and he guided his unresisting partner towards the elevators, unaware of the troubled gazes of several of their friends and colleagues which tracked their departure.

Earlier that morning: Blair's office, Rainier University:

"There you go, my dear. One cup of hot chocolate! Take five, Blair. You've been hard at it all morning!"

Janice, Eli's long-time secretary and a particular champion of Blair's, placed the mug on her friend's desk within easy reach before patting him gently on the shoulder. Although her smile was wide and affable, there was a hint of worry in her kind eyes as she met Blair's gaze.

As usual, his expression was one of sincere gratitude and affection, and he offered her a stunning smile as he thanked her for the beverage, but she was sad to see that - also as usual - there was that tiny trace of surprise and disbelief that anyone could think him worthy of doing him any such favours.

Gods, but how she wished she could do something about the young man's chronic lack of self-esteem. Then again, she supposed that only his Sentinel had the power to do that, and so far the miracle had yet to happen. Nevertheless, she lived in hope, because there was no one in her opinion who deserved comfort and support as much as Blair did.

Patting his shoulder once again, she turned and left Blair's tiny office, unaware of the slight sheen of tears in Blair's eyes as the young man's gaze tracked her exit.

Swallowing hard against the lump of emotion in his throat, Blair reached for the mug, a slightly perplexed frown creasing his brow. Every day small kindnesses like this cheered him greatly, and every day he wondered why his generous friends should bother with him. But he was enormously grateful all the same, and would cherish such moments against future barren patches which he was certain would come soon enough.

Especially if he couldn't get over his overwhelming fear of inadequacy and its associated dread of being finally rejected by his long-suffering Sentinel.

Alone in his office, and free from the need to put up any sort of public front, Blair allowed his shoulders to droop despondently even as he sipped his hot drink. He admitted to himself that he was exhausted, but there was no help for it. There were people who depended on him, and so many others who had been so good to him for whatever reason, that there was no way he could let them down, especially Jim. He truly believed that he constantly needed to prove that he was worthy of that generosity, and taking personal time out just didn't factor into the equation.

But goddess, he was so tired. He would have loved to just curl up in the ratty but comfortable old armchair in the corner of his tiny office and sleep for a few hours, but it couldn't happen. He had promised Jim that he would join him for a late lunch providing his lover had finished with his court appearance, and he had a few more of Eli's notes to type up before he left Rainier for the day.

Giving himself a shake and scolding himself roundly for his pathetic pity party, he put down his empty mug and pulled the pile of notes towards him, ready to start again.

Some short while later the notes were collated and typed up, and Blair saved and closed his file before glancing at his watch. It was almost time for him to leave if he was to make it to the PD punctually, and as he knew that Jim hated it when he was late for any reason, he decided he might as well set out right away. He knew the main cause for Jim's preoccupation with timekeeping was based on his fear for his Guide's safety, especially since Blair's abduction by the rogue sentinel, Alex Barnes, so Blair did his best to refrain from worrying Jim unnecessarily. He considered that he was already too much of a burden on his Sentinel without causing more problems, and the creeping disease of Blair's insecurity resolutely refused to be completely ignored and locked away in some dark compartment of Blair's psyche.

As he gathered his things together, carefully packing away his cherished laptop in his backpack, Blair told himself firmly that Jim wasn't to blame for his Guide's constantly hovering fear of succumbing to a full-blown crisis of confidence. Jim told him time and time again that he was loved and wanted, particularly during bonding, and every time he did so, Blair believed him. At least, he did at the time.

But when he was alone with his thoughts, he couldn't quite trust his own judgement, or, in fact, in Jim's own declarations of devotion ever since Tonya Richardson came on the scene.

He knew very well - and accepted the fact - that Jim wasn't to blame for the evil woman's machinations. His Sentinel had only been tempted to stray through the effects of powerful illegal drugs, and Blair was sure that under normal circumstances their bond was too strong to be broken. But what if there were other similar abnormal circumstances and situations awaiting them somewhere down the line? Would Jim be strong enough to resist, and would Blair have the strength to fight back, because the goddess knew he hadn't been able to make much of a job of

it the last time, allowing himself to be pushed aside and side-lined when he should have been up in Jim's face, demanding to be heard.

The persistently turbulent thoughts and the accompanying anxiety were giving him a headache, so he forcibly turned his mind instead to the content of the notes he had just typed up. They were of particular interest to him, as they were concerned with the indigenous Sentinel and Guide pair with whom Eli had been fortunate to interact and study, and as he made his way out to his car, Blair wistfully considered what Eli had surmised.

On the short drive back to the PD, although he concentrated automatically on the road and the traffic, Blair replayed his most recent conversation with Eli concerning the phenomenon of the native pair's bond.

Sitting together in Eli's impressive office only a couple of days ago, the older man had leaned forward eagerly, his elbows resting on the chair arms and hands clasped in his lap. Fixing his young protégé with a bright and compelling gaze, he began, "You see, dear boy, as I stressed in my notes –; which you'll soon have the pleasure of typing up – I've never seen anything like it before. Certainly not in our so-called 'civilised' society anyway. We might well have strong bonds in some of our more gifted Sentinel and Guide pairs –; take your bond with Jim as a prime example –; but I have to say that nothing I've seen before compares to the depth of understanding enjoyed by this pair. It would be anathema to them to have the sort of platonic bond some of our pairs are happy to maintain. In fact, I suspect that they, and their people, wouldn't consider such an arrangement to constitute a bond at all! Just a convenient alliance between compatible friends and warriors with perhaps a touch more depth and empathy than the average working partnership.

"No, it seemed to me that those two were so completely in tune, they were almost as one in every sense of the word. The tribal shaman maintained that they were two halves of one soul, bound for life, and if one were to die, the other would follow shortly afterwards. I admit that seems very harsh to me as a *mundane*. I mean, at least in our society a bereaved partner doesn't have to die also, even if his or her life is dependent on medication thereafter.

"Now, I can see the questions in your eyes, Blair. What are your thoughts on what I've described so far?"

"Um, well, I have to say I'm intrigued by the concept of total merging. I mean, Jim and I, well, um, we *seem* to achieve that during bonding," and here Blair blushed from neck to hairline at the thought of the full sexual bond Jim and he enjoyed.

"But what makes the native pair's bond so much stronger? I mean, I assume it would be the full sexual bond, but there must be something else, surely? Something extra that drives them and dispels any and all inhibitions?"

Eli had contemplated his young assistant for a long moment, head on one side as he considered his next words.

"Well, dear boy, as far as I could make out, and from what I was privileged to observe, there is some form of ritual involved. On occasion, the pair commit to each other in front of the whole tribe. Nothing overtly physical," he added quickly, seeing Blair's face blanch at the thought, "but more like an exchanging and re-affirming of vows in front of witnesses. I can't explain it better than that, I'm afraid. It's just that it appeared to me that they were the stronger for it, and the whole tribe obviously approved."

Looking thoughtful, Blair's tone was soft and a little tentative as he had answered.

"Perhaps it's a bit like a marriage contract. I mean, in our society, plenty of people live together and say they don't need the extra hassle and paperwork. But plenty of couples marry because they want the ceremony and the extra security they believe that the contract gives them. Perhaps the native pair thinks that way?"

"Then again, we have a pretty high divorce rate also, so apparently the marriage contract doesn't count for much to everyone..." and his voice tailed off as he frowned in consternation, disheartened that his train of thought apparently led nowhere.

But Eli was having none of it. "You know, Blair, you could be on the right track! In one sense anyway. Think of it this way. Yes, Western views regarding marriage are much more fluid now, and frequent divorce is an unfortunate fact of life. But to the indigenous people I encountered, it's still very much a permanent and binding contract. It's a matter of perspective, you see? Just because we so-called 'civilised' folks are so much more blasé and cynical about the whole concept doesn't mean that they think the same way. It's a matter of belief in both the contract and each other. If one believes in something that completely, it gives one the confidence to open one's mind to the fullest extent, and how much more would that entail in the case of a Sentinel / Guide bond? The power of the mind, dear boy! The power of the mind!"

"Well, that's my take on it anyway, dear boy, fanciful as it may seem coming from one such as me. I can see that you're not convinced, but give it some thought, hey? If this old cynic can believe in the possibility, so could you!" and he had chuckled then, obviously pleased to elicit an answering grin from Blair, even if it was somewhat rueful.

Pulling into the PD's underground parking lot, Blair realised that he was actually envious of Eli's native pair. He would give anything for that kind of unquestioning commitment. To experience a total and all-encompassing knowledge of each other at every level without fear or shame. And he wouldn't even care –; in fact, would actively embrace –; the possibility that one literally couldn't live without the other. As far as he was concerned, a life without Jim was inconceivable. But he had no idea as to whether Jim would feel the same. He suspected not, even though he

was sure Jim would miss him. Until such time as he could find and bond with another –; probably more suitable –; partner, anyway.

And on the other hand, he wouldn't like to think of Jim dying prematurely should Blair predecease his Sentinel, so perhaps he was wrong to have such thoughts.

Besides which, when Blair had mentioned the topic briefly just a couple of nights ago, Jim had hugged him and said, "Nah, babe, I don't think so! I think that Eli's an incurable romantic behind that scientific exterior, at least where Sentinels and Guides are concerned. I can't see that any bond could be stronger than what we already have, lover. Call me an unimaginative sceptic if you like, but I think this notion of a 'binding of souls' on a spiritual plane is well over the top!" and he had proceeded to make love to Blair so ardently that any further thoughts about Eli's theories had been driven from the young Guide's mind.

They were back full force now, however, and as Blair locked up his car and walked over to the elevator, he pondered sadly on the fact that modern Western society had become way too materialistic and closed-minded on so many levels now. Perhaps the indigenous, pre-industrialised tribes had the right of it, being less influenced by formal convention and more open and able to embrace the spiritual as much as the physical.

Yes, he did envy their open-mindedness and their perception of the quality of life in the widest sense of the word, but he told himself that he should be grateful for what he had. He was so lucky in so many ways; it was greedy and selfish to want more. And on that thought he entered the elevator car, immediately turning his attention to the two young uniformed cops who shared it with him, chatting cheerfully and inconsequentially until he reached his floor.

On exiting the car, he took a moment to calm himself, assuming a relaxed and carefree demeanour before approaching the bullpen, wanting above all to reassure Jim that he was OK. He therefore pasted on a wide smile and pushed open the door.

And knew immediately that Jim wasn't fooled at all.

Shortly afterwards, Barney's Bar:

Seated in a quiet booth at the back of the popular bar situated only a block or two from the PD, Jim took a swig of his soda and fixed his Guide with a direct but sympathetic gaze.

"OK, kiddo. Just relax, baby, and tell me what's bothering you. And no obfuscations, OK? I want to help, lover, and I can't do that if you're shutting your deepest feelings off.

"I understand that you don't want to 'bother me', but how often do I have to reiterate that I *want* to be bothered? I *want* to understand, and I *want* to be there for you in every sense of the word!

"Talk to me, Blair. *Link* with me! You need me and my support, babe, and I want to provide it.

"And I need *you*, my Guide. And I need you happy, healthy and whole."

Biting his lip, Blair ducked his head in shame. This was the last thing he needed –; a demand, however gentle –; to reveal his innermost fears. What could he say? If he lied, Jim would know right away, but if he were to pour out his deepest fears, how disgusted would his Sentinel be to hear such weak-kneed drivel? They had worked hard for nearly two years now to build an unbreakable bond between them, so who was he to question the validity of that bond? Especially on the basis of Eli's fanciful theories surrounding a tribal pairing thousands of miles away from their own reality.

But he had to come up with something. He had to speak out so as not to offend Jim, who was trying so hard to be so patient.

Taking a deep, calming breath, he raised his head and met Jim's quizzical gaze.

"I'm so sorry, Jim. So sorry that I'm even more of a head-case now –; and a disappointment to you for sure. I'm trying, my Sentinel, truly I am! I had hoped that by now I would have gotten my act together and been everything you want and need me to be.

"But it's so hard, and I'm at a loss as to what to do next! I'm so tired, Jim. I hate to admit it, but it's true. And I'm sure you've already realised that anyway.

"Please, Jim! Please give me another chance! I want to be what you need. I *will* be, I promise! There's nothing I want more, I swear! I've just got to work harder at figuring it out for myself."

"Oh Blair, Blair!" Jim's response was uttered in a tone that was part hurt and part exasperation. Reaching out to grasp his Guide's hand and squeeze it supportively, he continued, "Look, Chief, there's so much I want you to know about how I feel about you. So much you'd *already* know if you weren't so shy about reading me during bonding.

"This anxiety –; this diffidence on your part –; should have been kicked into touch months ago.

"I'm sorry, truly sorry, about how I treated you over the Richardson debacle, but surely you realise that it was an aberration? Don't you?" this last query uttered in an almost plaintive tone.

As always, Blair was quick to reassure Jim, as he hated to witness any sign of distress in his Sentinel and lover, especially if he himself was the cause. Having said that, by now Jim was wise to him, and could discern the uncertainty lurking behind his Guide's fervent response. "Of course I know that, Jim! It wasn't your fault! I've told you that time and time again, just like everyone else has! What do I have to do to convince you that I believe you?"

"How about 'fessing up to *your* deepest fears, baby?" Jim murmured quietly but firmly. "I've felt you shutting yourself off from me when we're bonding, just as you're refusing to push into my

mind any further than you think I want you to go. Where's the trust we once shared, lover? It might not have been 100%, but it was getting there.

"And now we're virtually tippy-toeing around each other's minds instead of trying for a whole-hearted joining. Why is that, Blair? And what are we going to do about it? Because I love you more than life, my Guide, and I need to be able to prove it to you!"

Slow tears began to slide unwanted down Blair's pale cheeks as he fought to formulate an acceptable response.

"I...I don't know, Jim. Perhaps there's nothing more we *can* do, although I pray that's not the case. Just please, please believe me when I say I also love you more than life itself, and I swear I'll keep trying to do my best by you. I'm here for you alone, and that's how it'll always be, for as long as you need me."

"Well, that'll be for ever and always, babe, so it looks like we're just going to have to get through this rough patch as best we may.

"And now, my Guide, I want to see you eat something! Sentinel here, and I can tell you're hungry, even if you won't admit it!

"So, what's your pleasure, Chief? Whatever you fancy is yours, so just tell me what you want."

And there was no way Blair could refuse his lover's firm but undeniably caring command.

The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully, with Jim studying a couple of new case files and Blair willingly catching up with his partner's unfinished reports. They had returned from lunch sharing a slightly calmer and more comfortable frame of mind, although both were aware that the deeper problem was merely shelved once again for the present. Blair was still upset and anxious that he had let Jim down and hurt his feelings yet again, and Jim was completely out of ideas as to how to regain the lost ground in their relationship. Other than forcing himself on Blair both physically and mentally during bonding, which would undoubtedly damage them both irreparably, he had no option but to be patient and wait for Blair to find enough confidence in both himself and in his Sentinel to open his mind freely once again. And then maybe take that final step and read Jim fully once and for all.

Superficially, nothing seemed amiss between them, and they interacted with their friends and colleagues as normal. Rhonda plied Blair with hot chocolate and cookies, and Megan regaled them both with a hilarious recounting of the visit she and Joel had just made to a property where a suspected smuggling operation of exotic large animals was being carried out. Acting on information received from a concerned neighbour, they had entered the property only to find that it was, in fact, a rather kinky brothel. The highly embarrassed 'Madame' was indeed dressed like a large feline, as were several of her girls, for the pleasure of clients who fancied

themselves as either lion tamers or 'big game hunters' or some such. Not only that, but one of the red-faced 'lion tamers' turned out to be one of the Mayor's most trusted aides. Although the Madame insisted that it was a licenced, private club, the licence had apparently lapsed, if it had ever existed at all, so Joel and Megan had had no option but to arrest those present on charges of soliciting prostitution.

Needless to say, booking had been an interesting experience for all concerned, and Joel and Megan hadn't gotten over their amusement yet.

"I swear to God, mates, it's true!" Megan chortled. "When Joel and I went into the back room, there was Councilman Mulrooney, large as life and wearing nothing but a leopard print thong, apparently trying - not very hard - to keep three of Madame Teresa's biggest girls dressed as lions and tigers at bay! Even had the whip and chair!

"Anyway, it gets better! When he saw us, the daft drongo says, 'Oh, officers! Thank god you're here! I thought I was done for!' It's true, no word of a lie!"

By that point, she, Blair and Joel were propping each other up, tears of unrestrained mirth streaming down their faces as they clutched at ribs aching from laughter.

And Jim was glad to witness it, as he couldn't remember the last time he had seen his Guide so unashamedly happy.

Eventually getting themselves back under control, Megan and Joel returned to their desks to write up their reports, and Blair put the finishing touches to the final piece of Jim's outstanding paperwork. Jim was about to suggest that they ask if it was OK to leave, when the phone on his desk rang. It turned out to be Director Kingsley from the Sentinel / Guide Department, asking if Blair could spare an hour or so to meet up with a newly-online young Guide who needed some counselling and reassurance from the Alpha Guide.

Sending Jim an apologetic glance, Blair agreed and prepared to leave, after promising Jim that he wouldn't be more than an hour at most at the Department.

"It's OK, Chief. You do what you need to do and I'll see you back at the loft, all right? It's my turn to cook anyway, so I'll see what I can come up with. Take care, babe," and he pulled the smaller man into a warm hug before sending him on his way with a gentle push.

He watched with a sad smile as Blair left the bullpen, knowing that the young man really didn't need the extra work today, but also that it wasn't in his Guide's nature to refuse. He would just have to make sure that Blair relaxed as much as possible once he returned home, and his smile broadened as he planned just how that could be accomplished.

Just as he began to tidy his desk in preparation for leaving, he was summoned to Simon Banks' office. This time it was a gentler version of his captain's usual peremptory command, which gave Jim pause as he raised a faintly quizzical brow.

"Jim, if you've a moment, I'd like to talk to you," Simon called out, his tone much more moderate than expected.

"Sure, Captain. No problem," Jim responded, and made his way over to the office, closing the door behind him.

"Take a seat, Jim. This is unofficial, just a chat between friends. Coffee?"

Slightly puzzled, and definitely curious, Jim nodded affably as he accepted a mug of Simon's latest gourmet brew.

"Thanks, Simon. This smells good. What can I do for you?"

Settling himself behind his desk with his own mug, Simon looked somewhat uneasy as he gazed at his friend and subordinate.

"Look, Jim, I don't mean to pry, and I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but how are things between you and Sandburg? I mean, I know you two are just as efficient and successful as ever in the field, and most folks would assume that all is well, but I think I know you better than that. And to be honest, I'm not the only one. Director Kingsley has voiced his concerns in my hearing, and I agree with him. There's something not quite right with you two, and the other Sentinel and Guide pairs are worried about you both, particularly Blair, it must be said.

"Do you feel able to talk to me? Because you know I'll do my best to help. I may not have been the best friend to Blair in the early days of your bonding, but I love that kid like another son now, and you're still one of my best friends. Is there something I can do?"

Jim's immediate reaction was to bridle in affronted indignation at his captain and friend's temerity, but the next moment he forced himself to control his anger. He realised that Simon's offer was genuine, and the man was only stating the obvious anyway. He therefore sat back with a deep sigh, then met Simon's worried gaze with resignation.

"It's OK, Simon," he began with marked reluctance. "I realise you only want to help, but I'm not sure I can explain myself that well. Words are Blair's thing, not mine. But I'll try. God knows, I could do with some advice, and even if ultimately I don't take it, I think I need someone to listen to me. Just so I can get things out in the open, you know? And that in itself may provide me with a few answers, huh?"

"I hope so, Jim, I surely do. And I'd be honoured to listen to anything you want to tell me."

Jim was silent for a moment while he attempted to get his thoughts into some sort of coherent order, then, after another deep sigh, he spoke out.

"You're right in that something's not as it should be between me and Blair. It's my fault, insofar as I've hurt him unintentionally not once but twice in the space of less than two years. Maybe if he hadn't already been so fragile when we bonded, we could have gotten past our problems by

now, but through no fault of his own, he's more vulnerable than an Alpha Guide –; or even a normal grad student –; should ever be. He tries so hard to do what's best for me, and I can't fault his commitment, but he's scared of so many things. Scared of failure, scared of letting me down, scared of his own power and his ability to control it, you name it, the list's endless. And yet he's no coward. Far from it. He fights his demons all the time, every day. He won't give in, and the effort's wearing him out.

"And because he's also scared of what I still might do, he won't let me help. And why shouldn't he be scared? For God's sake, first I push him into a glass-topped table so his hands were cut to pieces, and just when we were recovering from that, I go and fall for that Richardson bitch!

"I know –; you don't have to tell me –; that the second time it wasn't all my fault. But it happened anyway, and Blair was hurt again so badly by Alex Barnes. How can he trust me after that? A Sentinel is supposed to protect the Guide, and I did a piss-poor job of protecting mine!"

"Wait a minute, Jim," Simon replied, a slightly puzzled frown creasing his brow. "What you say is true, to a certain extent, even though I personally think you're taking on too much of the blame. But I thought that your bond meant that you could share each other's thoughts and emotions, right? There's a special link between you, yes? Now *I'm* sure you're completely sincere, and I know you care deeply for Blair. As I also know he worships the ground that you walk on. I don't need to be a Sentinel to see that.

"So why isn't he convinced that you're genuinely sorry and that you can be trusted not to hurt him again?"

"Well, there's the problem, Simon," Jim countered unhappily. "He *won't* share his thoughts and emotions with me anymore. Not the ones that matter, anyway. He believes that it's unfair for him to burden me with his own fears and troubles, and he's too insecure to 'read' me fully, even at the height of bonding. To be honest, he'd never quite managed that before, but we were definitely getting to that point before I went and spoiled it. But until he does manage it, he'll never know just how much he means to me. And I can't think of any other way of getting through to him, so if there's something you think might work, please feel free to tell me! The uncertainty is wearing us both down."

"Hmmm, I didn't realise it was that bad," mused Simon, plainly troubled on Jim's account. "As a *mundane*, I can't begin to understand just how deeply you both must be affected by Blair's on-going lack of self-confidence, but I can see that something needs to be done, and soon, before the kid goes into meltdown. And takes you with him, my friend! Has Blair talked it through with anyone, do you know? I mean, I know he's expected to act as a counsellor for other Guides, but is there anyone out there who can counsel him?"

"I know he's talked to Eli Stoddard about Sentinel and Guide matters in general terms, and he's attended a few mandatory psych eval sessions when occasion demanded it, but knowing Blair, he won't have wanted to bother his friends with his problems. Having said that, there was

something that he tried to discuss with me recently. But as usual, I shut him down," Jim added with a touch of bitter self-recrimination. "It just didn't seem relevant at the time."

"Well, maybe you can tell me, and I'll give you my opinion," Simon offered. "Can't do any harm."

"If you're sure? Well, OK then. If I understood him correctly, Blair was telling me about a native Sentinel and Guide pair Eli was able to study while he was in Borneo. Eli was very excited, and told Blair that this pair was far more committed than any Westernised pair he's ever seen, and that he believed there was some sort of ritual involved that made their bond even stronger. To be honest, I thought he was talking rubbish, and I guess I pretty much said so, but I could tell that Blair was disappointed in my response. He seemed to be quite taken with Eli's theory."

Simon considered Jim's words for a few moments, trying to digest and make sense of what he'd just heard. Eventually, he met Jim's inquisitive gaze again and spoke, voice and tone thoughtful.

"This ritual, Jim. What form did it take?"

"I don't really know, Simon. I wasn't really paying much attention. Didn't involve public sex though," he added with a wry grin. "Maybe some sort of exchange of vows in front of the tribe?"

"Bit like marriage then," Simon responded, not altogether jokingly. Then, more seriously he continued, "Do you think that's how Blair might view it, Jim? I mean, would he consider that type of ceremony an indication of permanence? A sort of added layer of security?"

"It's just a thought, because I have no idea of your domestic situation other than the fact that you're bonded and you live together. How does that work, anyway? No need for graphic detail, but I've never really had reason to concern myself with the legal and practical issues surrounding a recognised bonded pair, except insofar as it might impinge on the running of the MCU."

Jim stared at him, a perplexed frown between his brows. Simon's words had certainly given him pause for thought, and he was suddenly aware that he'd never really given his and Blair's domestic situation much consideration. Certainly not as much as he perhaps should have done. When he had rescued Blair from Galbini, in Jim's mind there had been no question that the young man belonged with him, and he had acted accordingly. He had taken Blair home, cared for him, and bonded with him, with Blair's full and free consent. He had arranged for his Guide to work alongside him in the PD, and also for him to return to Rainier as Eli's Research Assistant, and the young man received a small stipend for both jobs which Jim insisted he kept for himself. Otherwise, he shared Jim's home and his life as a matter of course, as far as Jim was concerned.

But maybe Jim should have put written instructions and guidelines in place to guarantee Blair's legal rights. It hadn't occurred to him that Blair might believe he was living on Jim's charity, entirely dependent on his Sentinel's goodwill, and that he would have no legal recompense should Jim either throw him out, or predecease him.

No wonder the young man had an underlying insecurity. He had never had anything or anyone to call his own until he met Jim, so how could he not secretly believe that it was too good to last?

Jim realised he needed to do something about that state of affairs and do it soon. And suddenly he knew just how to accomplish it.

Looking up at Simon's faintly bemused expression, Jim felt a slow smile begin to creep across his face.

"You know what, Simon, you've given me plenty to think about, but I think I know how to proceed now. When you asked me about Blair and my living arrangements, it made me realise how much I had taken for granted. As far as I was concerned, he belonged with me, and was my responsibility. The only legal and binding bit of paperwork I bothered to acquire was the necessary documentation from the Sentinel / Guide Department recognising our official bond. It never occurred to me that Blair might need more than that.

"All his life he was never allowed to consider that he had any claim on anyone or anything. His hippy-dippy Mom made sure of that. And all this time he's been devoting himself to me, in the back of his mind he must always have been waiting for the other shoe to drop. For me to get fed up with him and decide I wanted to break our bond. It makes no difference that in reality it couldn't happen without one or both of us suffering agonies. In his head he knows that, but in his heart the fear of rejection has always existed.

"So I'm going to make everything legal. He's already named in my Will as my heir, even if he doesn't realise it, but I'm going to put his name on the lease for the loft. And combine our finances and all other resources so we'll have equal access. I just can't believe I didn't think to do it before!"

Simon's grin was broad as he nodded in enthusiastic agreement, but then widened even more as he said, "Why don't you take it a step further, Jim? If you're happy to make him an equal partner in everything, why don't you just marry the guy? As a bonded pair you could have applied for special dispensation at any time, but now same sex marriage is accepted in the state anyway. Think that'd be enough security for him?"

And Jim's grin matched his friend's as he replied, "You're right again, my friend! I wanted to do something special for the second anniversary of our bonding next month, and what better way to celebrate it but by marrying my Guide? Thanks, Simon. No wonder they pay you the big bucks!"

"Heh, heh, you're welcome, Jim," Simon chuckled smugly. "Now, get out of here. You've got plans to make!"

And with a cheerful salute and word of farewell, Jim left the office, eager to get back to the loft and start things moving.

Later that evening:

Blair burst breathlessly into the loft, his eyes wide with anxiety as words of abject apology tumbled from his lips. His scent was tainted with distress and misery as he turned to face Jim, only to be brought up short by the look on his Sentinel's face. Rather than annoyance and the tight-lipped anger brought on by worry that Blair expected to see, Jim was smiling softly, and looking, well, almost mellow.

Crossing the floor to take the young man into his arms, Jim murmured, "It's OK, Chief, calm down! I'm not mad at you. Director Kingsley rang to tell me that your meeting with the new Guide was likely to over-run, so I knew you were going to be later than expected. Take a breath and relax, babe."

Sagging in relief, Blair did as he was told, his scent gradually regaining its normal enticing aroma. Snuggling his face against Jim's neck and shoulder, he murmured, "Thank you, Jim. I needed this. I was so worried that you would be upset with me for being so late. I mean, I know why you would be. It's because you care about what happens to me. But I hate to be the cause of anxiety for you. You have enough to worry about without me adding to it."

"Shhh, babe, it's OK. No need to apologise any more. I know you wouldn't do it on purpose, just as I also know that your sense of duty wouldn't allow you to cut short an important induction and instruction session. Let's just say that, thanks to Adam Kingsley's forethought, I knew what to expect.

"And now, I suggest you take a few minutes to freshen up and change into something more comfortable, then we can eat. I've done spaghetti and meatballs. OK for you?"

Face lighting up with a happy grin, Blair nodded enthusiastically. "Ooh yeah! I love your spaghetti sauce, Jim! I won't be long!" and he almost flew across to the bathroom to do his lover's bidding, mouth already watering at the thought of indulging in one of Jim's signature dishes. The Sentinel might not cook that often, but when he did, it was good!

A couple of hours later, Jim and Blair were relaxing on the sofa in front of the TV. They had enjoyed a companionable dinner together, and once the clean-up was done, Jim had suggested they chill out by watching a couple of films they'd pre-recorded and not yet had the opportunity to view. Although Blair felt as if he ought to be doing something such as running through Eli's next batch of notes, he was happy to agree to Jim's suggestion anyway, knowing that it would please his lover. And truth be told the thought of just resting was very appealing, especially as it meant that they could both simply enjoy each other's company.

And it truly was enjoyable, and something that Blair realised they hadn't indulged in for far too long. He was guiltily aware that it was probably mostly down to him, since he seemed to be continually rushing from place to place of late, their only real 'togetherness' being when they were in bed, cuddled close in an exhausted tangle of limbs. But for now, here he was, lying on the sofa with his head resting on a pillow on Jim's lap. Long, elegant fingers carded through his curls, and he felt as if he could purr in pleasure. He was barely aware of what was playing on the screen before him, being for once far too relaxed and content to just lie still and be pampered by his beloved Sentinel.

As for Jim, he was only too glad to have finally managed to pin his Guide down long enough for the young man to get some real relaxation. And it did him good also, being able to indulge his senses in his lover's willing proximity. For instance, Blair's hair was a delight as far as the Sentinel was concerned. It was down to Blair's shoulders now after almost two years of growth. Although the young man had decided to grow it out originally because it would help cover the hated chain tattoo on his neck, he now kept it long because he knew that Jim liked it that way. He was much less concerned about the disfigurement now, covered as it usually was by the choker style pendant Jim had given him. And at times like these Jim truly appreciated the gesture. The long, shining curls were a feast for sentinel sight, consisting of myriad tones and highlights from dark brown to auburn to gold, while sentinel touch was more than satisfied by the silky feel of the individual tresses.

Hearing homed in on the rhythmic beating of his Guide's heart, slow and steady as the young man rested, and his delicious scent was free from any taint of anxiety or stress. And Jim fully intended to indulge his sense of taste later that night.

After a while, Blair was so relaxed he felt as if his bones had turned to jello. He was warm, loved and cossetted, and he wanted to reciprocate. Turning his face up so he could see Jim's reaction, he murmured, "Bond with me, Sentinel. Please?"

He was answered by a slow smile and an expression of pure love and pleasure in the ice-blue gaze that met his.

"Your wish is my command, my Guide," came the heart-felt reply, and Blair shivered in eager anticipation as Jim helped him sit up and then took him in his arms. Nuzzling the soft skin behind Blair's ear, Jim continued, "Come on, babe. How about you go on upstairs and I'll join you as soon as I've locked up?"

And Jim was gratified to see the enthusiasm that greeted his suggestion as Blair slid off his lap and moved quickly towards the stairs, throwing Jim a 'come hither' look over his shoulder that made Jim chuckle in delight. The fact that Blair had instigated the upcoming bonding pleased him no end, and he chose to ignore the faint hint of uncertainty he had detected in Blair's request. It was enough that the young man had had the courage to ask for what he needed, and Jim wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to love his precious Guide to satiation.

After one of the quickest security checks ever, Jim hastened upstairs to find Blair already naked and in bed, just covered by a sheet. The expression on his Guide's attractive features was both sultry and a touch nervous as he licked his lush lips with the tip of a pink tongue, and Jim's arousal reached almost epic proportions. Stripping quickly, Jim moved to the bed, holding Blair's blue gaze with an ardent one of his own. Reaching down, he carefully peeled back the sheet to reveal Blair's beautiful body, yet again struck by the compact and perfectly proportioned frame which was his and his alone to enjoy. Blair was still slender –; more so than he should be through his frenetic lifestyle –; but it didn't diminish his power to attract. Neither did the bondage scars which had mostly faded from normal sight, but which were still detectable by sentinel vision. Jim was well aware that the more recent scars on Blair's back and buttocks from Alex Barnes' whipping were much more visible, but he was careful to refrain from reacting negatively every time he saw them so as not to upset his already body-conscious young lover.

"Let me learn you, baby. I need to refresh my memory," he growled, pleased with Blair's willing compliance as he opened his senses and began to do just that. He mapped every delicious inch of the enticing body, touching, listening, sniffing and tasting and looking his fill until Blair writhed with lust.

He paid special attention to the cinnamon-coloured nipples and eager cock until Blair was pleading for release.

"Please, Jim, take me now! Please! I can't wait any longer!"

Not about to deny the urgent request, Jim lifted the smaller man onto his lap in their position of choice, and Blair rode him to a breathtakingly explosive and satisfying mutual climax. The bond sang between them, and their commitment to one another was reaffirmed.

In the lazy aftermath, Jim smiled down at the tousled head resting beneath his chin, thinking about what he had learned during their joining. Blair had been much more open than of late, and had allowed Jim virtually full access to his innermost thoughts. Not that Jim had abused the privilege though. He had learned to recognise signs of diffidence and was careful to treat such areas with gentleness and respect.

On the other hand, Blair still held back from reading Jim fully, even though he had been a little more adventurous this time. But in one sense, it was no bad thing, Jim supposed, because, as with the surprise birthday party he had arranged for Blair the previous year, his plans for the wedding next month stayed secret.

Three weeks later:

MCU bullpen:

Jim leaned against Megan's desk, arms folded and face creased in a frown of consternation. He had been congratulating himself on how his plans were coming together for the wedding the following week, but something Megan had just said had given him pause for thought. As Blair was at the U this morning, Jim had taken the opportunity to run through the arrangements he had made, mentally ticking them off as he went.

The actual venue was going to be the main hall in the Sentinel / Guide Department building. It was a well-appointed room which could be used as conference room, lecture theatre or dinner venue as required, and Jim had already booked it and decided on the layout for the ceremony. The ceremony itself was going to be conducted by Director Kingsley, since he was licensed to officiate at weddings. In Jim's opinion he was the most appropriate choice, quite aside from the fact that the man declared himself to be honoured to have been approached. Like most people who had anything to do with Blair, he was extremely fond of the young empath, and the thought of joining his Alpha pair together in matrimony was a source of great pleasure and satisfaction.

With help from Megan and Rhonda, Jim had sourced caterers who would supply the wedding breakfast, and also a florist who, as an ex-student and friend of Blair's, had been only too glad to prepare the flower arrangements and table decorations at cost.

All in all Jim had been smugly satisfied with everything thus far, until Megan had spoken to him just moments ago.

"Hey, Jimbo! You're looking mighty pleased with yourself. I'm assuming it's because your plans for next week are going smoothly?"

"Yeah, they are, thanks to you and everyone else I've approached. It's been far simpler than I'd expected so far. Just hope I haven't forgotten anything! I bought the rings yesterday and gave them to Simon for safe-keeping seeing as he and Daryl will be standing up for us."

Jim's grin was friendly as he replied, but the smile was wiped from his face when she regarded him speculatively for a second before continuing, her tone turning thoughtful.

"That's great, mate, good on you. It certainly sounds as if you've got everything covered.

"But you know, I'm not sure you're doing the right thing keeping Sandy in the dark. I mean, you know how much I love him. He's my best mate, and I'm worried that he might over-react if he's just presented with a wedding ceremony out of the blue! I mean, it's a lot more to be faced with than the surprise party you threw for him, and that rocked his world right enough. It's potentially life-changing for the both of you, so don't you think he deserves a bit of advanced warning?"

Moving up to stand beside her, Joel added his own words of caution.

"I think Megs has a point, Jim. I mean, all of us want to see you two married and happy ever after, but we all know that Blair's still shy and prone to suffer from anxiety attacks on occasion even if he tries so hard not to show it and let you down. Has he any idea at all of what you're planning? I'd've thought that he might have detected something during bonding, but there's no evidence of it as far as I can see.

"I'm sorry, Jim," he added hurriedly as he saw the effects his words were having on his colleague. Taking in Jim's lowering brows and darkening expression; he said contritely, "That was insensitive of me. I didn't mean to pry into your private lives. It's none of my business."

In truth, Jim had been affronted by Joel's comment, but almost immediately he told himself that the kindly man only had Blair's -; and Jim's -; well-being at heart. And he knew that Megan only meant well also, her propensity to act as Blair's 'big sister' motivating her to interfere on his behalf whenever she thought it necessary. Neither of them deserved to fall foul of his instinctive desire to tell them both to shut up and keep their noses out of his affairs.

However, he wasn't quite noble enough to just shrug off their words with a grin and a carefree 'de nada' either, and was aware that they were both worried that they'd hurt his feelings.

Well, let them! he thought ungraciously, even though he knew his reaction was rather puerile. Between them they'd managed to burst his bubble, and now he had to re-consider whether his plans and his motives for keeping the whole thing secret were indeed appropriate for the occasion.

Returning morosely to his desk, he sat down and pulled an open file towards him, although his mind was far away from the contents he was supposed to be perusing.

It was true that Blair still had no idea of the actual plans as he was still holding back from reading Jim fully during bonding. On the other hand, as a highly-rated empath, he had to know that there was something going on. There were plenty of people involved in the planning as well as those who would be attending as guests, so a certain amount of anticipatory eagerness and excitement was bound to leak out despite everyone's best attempts at keeping the whole enterprise secret. It was only because Blair was too diffident to push into others' minds uninvited that had ensured that the puzzling emotions he could feel circulating around him remained vague and insubstantial - rather like the calm before a storm.

Then again, although the young man continually assured Jim that he trusted him not to do anything that would deliberately hurt his Guide, Jim was uneasily aware that Blair would keep any suspicions to himself for fear of offending his Sentinel.

He was no nearer making a decision either way when he was distracted by the sounds of Blair's arrival at the PD, so he squelched his disturbing thoughts in favour of simply enjoying the way his senses responded to his Guide's presence. Right now he needed the grounding touch that only Blair could provide, and in a while he would take his Guide to lunch.

After that - with Simon's blessing - he intended to take some personal time so that they could go clothes shopping, because Blair didn't own a formal suit, and Jim knew just where to purchase one once he had persuaded Blair to agree. And that little exercise might just provide the opportunity Jim needed to prime Blair a little for the following week.

Yes, Jim could truthfully tell Blair that he had arranged a special occasion to mark the second anniversary of their bonding, and that he wanted them both to be able to dress appropriately. And if Blair assumed that it was some sort of slap-up meal, or perhaps a small get-together with their friends, then so be it. At least he wouldn't be completely in the dark after all, and perhaps Megan's fears wouldn't be realised.

One week later, #307, 852 Prospect:

The day of Jim and Blair's second anniversary had arrived, and thus far the cool October morning had remained clear and bright, an unexpected bonus as far as both men were concerned. They were enjoying a leisurely breakfast since Jim had taken the day off, and Blair had found himself unexpectedly free also. As he had explained to Jim the previous evening, Eli had made other arrangements for the day, so had told Blair to take some time for himself -; something that Blair had been only too glad to do in view of the special date.

"I'm not sure why Eli has been called away," Blair had mused, smiling softly. "But it couldn't have been better timing, could it? Do you think he arranged it that way so we could spend the day together? That would be so thoughtful of him."

And Jim had nodded his agreement, knowing only too well that it was exactly what the older man had had in mind.

Wrapped comfortably in their warm robes, they faced each other across the breakfast table enjoying a meal of eggs and toast, and Jim felt a warm surge of love and gratitude as he studied the young man opposite.

Fetchingly tousled, Blair had the glow of a well-loved Guide, having been treated to a prolonged and thorough love-making and bonding session the previous evening. Jim had outdone himself as he mapped and touched his lover with exquisite care and gentleness, wanting to show Blair just how much he was loved, and also preparing his unsuspecting companion for the ceremony ahead.

And later, once he had recovered somewhat, Blair had reciprocated in kind, using all of his adoration and empathic ability to reduce his Sentinel to a thoroughly sated and boneless pile of goo.

Their actual bonding had been sweet and gentle, and even if Blair still hadn't quite 'read' Jim fully, it was the best he had yet managed, and Jim was sure that a complete merge wasn't far off. And if everything went to plan, all being well today might just see that miracle happen.

With breakfast over and clean-up done, they went hand in hand to the bathroom to take a shared shower. It was something they still did as often as possible, both enjoying the intimacy and comfort it provided, although it had to be said that lately they had had little opportunity to indulge in such luxury. Hectic timetables had encroached on their personal time, so they both intended to make the most of this occasion.

As Jim soaped up his partner's slender body, he smiled down at the smaller man, nothing but affection in his eyes.

"You know, babe, we should do this more often!" he chuckled, pleased when Blair returned his smile.

"Yes, I know, Jim. And my New Year's resolution is to make more time for you. As far as I'm concerned, today is the beginning of my year, not January 1st, and I know I've been neglecting you lately.

"I didn't mean to, but it's time I did something about it," and he blushed under Jim's warm and appreciative regard.

"Then that makes two of us, babe. We've both been allowing our busy lives to get between us, so from now on we'll make a concerted effort to have more 'together' time. I'm completely down with that!" and he leaned down and took his lover's succulent mouth in a deep but gentle kiss.

A short while later both men were dressed and ready to go out for the day. Jim had told Blair that they would be having a late lunch –; which was true, after a fashion, if you counted the wedding breakfast as 'lunch' –; but had also said that director Kingsley wanted to see them at the Sentinel / Guide Department first. Also true, but not in the way Blair understood it.

In any case, Jim had suggested that they get fully ready so as not to waste any time coming back to the loft.

Having received Blair's ready agreement, they had both donned their new clothes, and Jim had to admit that his Guide looked absolutely stunning. The suit he had been persuaded to let Jim buy for him was beautifully cut in a modern style, and was in a shade of dark blue. Underneath it he wore a sapphire blue collarless shirt and his choker pendant, which he would never willingly remove. The blues brought out the colour of his eyes, and he wore his hair loose in a halo of silken curls.

All in all, it was hard for Jim to keep from ravishing him there and then, so aroused was he at the sight.

On the other hand, Blair was just as appreciative of Jim's attire. He had always loved to see his Sentinel in a suit and formal shirt and tie which was one reason why he secretly approved of court days when Jim had no option but to dress for the occasion. Jim might have considered it to be an imposition, but to Blair, as to most other observers, he never failed to look positively handsome and unconsciously elegant. This time his suit matched Blair's in shade, if a little more formal in cut than Blair's, and fitted his buff and impressive physique perfectly. His shirt was pale blue, and his tie a complementary darker blue silk.

Eyeing each other in mutual admiration, Jim finally murmured, "Come on, Chief. We'd best shake a leg if we're going to meet up with Director Kingsley in time. Because if we don't get moving now, I swear, baby, we won't be going anywhere!" and he leered suggestively at his giggling Guide.

Grinning widely, Blair allowed Jim to usher him out of the loft, looking forward now to whatever Jim had arranged for them as he was certain that the lunch must be something very special indeed to warrant dressing up like this.

Sitting in the truck, Blair was almost bouncing in excitement, as he could easily feel similar emotions rolling off Jim in waves. It never occurred to him that the faintest hint of nervousness he could also discern was anything more than part of the same combination of exhilaration and anticipation that was gripping him, and was simply a normal reaction in advance of a shared special event.

If he had but known it, Jim was actually beginning to feel distinctly worried as the (hopefully) auspicious occasion loomed closer. Perhaps he had made a serious error of judgement in not proposing to Blair beforehand, and the upcoming ceremony was going to prove to be too much of a shock for his skittish young Guide to endure after all.

Whatever the case, it was too late now to back out, unless he was to turn the truck around and hightail it out of Cascade, and he really didn't think that would do either of them any favours. He therefore smiled widely –; and hopefully convincingly –; at his bouncing partner, and pulled up outside the Sentinel / Guide Department building, mentally girding his loins for the upcoming scene.

As they entered the imposing building, the attractive young lady at the reception desk inclined her head politely as she offered a formal greeting.

"Alpha Sentinel Ellison, Alpha Guide Sandburg, welcome."

Then, knowing that they both preferred a more informal approach, she added, "Jim, Blair, so good to see you. And may I say congratulations to you both. Please go right in. They're all waiting for you."

Blair did the slightest of double-takes, then, simply assuming that she knew about the significance of the date, offered her a friendly smile and a word of thanks.

However, he was immediately struck by a sudden increase in Jim's unease, and his open smile became slightly strained and quizzical as he met Jim's rather rueful gaze.

"What's the matter, Jim? Is there something I should know?" he muttered worriedly, looking around him properly for the first time.

"Um...what's with all the flowers, man? They're beautiful! Is someone getting married here today?" Then, more assertively he added, "Why didn't you tell me? Who is it? Who're the lucky couple? Is it a new Sentinel and Guide pair? Are we going to watch?" and he started to bounce on the spot, eager to participate and offer his own congratulations.

"Calm down, babe," murmured Jim, wrapping an arm around his Guide's waist. "It's OK, Chief, honestly. Let's just go on in, all right?"

Blair sobered again, concerned about Jim's suddenly worried demeanour. Perhaps it was someone his Sentinel didn't approve of, and to whom he was wary of introducing his Guide.

Then they were at the open double doors, and Blair knew. He just knew the beautifully decorated roomful of guests was waiting for them. For Jim and Blair.

And he freaked.

"Ohmygod. Ohmygod! What is this? What's going on?" and he started to hyper-ventilate and shudder in the first stages of an almighty panic attack, only to have his Sentinel quickly turn him around to face him.

Holding him firmly by the upper arms, Jim forced Blair's round-eyed 'deer-in-the-headlights' stare to meet his own ardent gaze.

"Blair, baby, link with me and read me! It's OK, lover. This is something we both need. I love you, my Guide, and I want to show the world how much you mean to me."

His vehement words cut through the fog of terror, and Blair tried his best to take them in.

Then he heard Jim continue, his beloved voice compelling as he said, "Feel them, baby. Read them! All those people in there waiting for us. There's nothing but love there, Blair. Love and approval for us both. Everyone in that room is rooting for us, Blair. You're the empath, babe. Feel them and believe, my Guide, and believe in me too. You're mine, babe, for ever. And I'm yours. And I want to prove it to you, once and for all."

And Blair did read them. And felt nothing but happiness, eager anticipation and goodwill emanating from each and every one present.

And those emotions were magnified a hundredfold in his Sentinel, who was gazing at him fixedly with pure love and conviction glowing in his ice blue eyes.

Jim was right. This was their moment, and he wasn't going to waste it.

Taking a deep, cleansing breath, Blair forced himself to calm down. And after a long moment, he shook himself briskly and answered, using every last ounce of fortitude and sheer bloody-minded effort to keep his voice as steady as possible.

"Yes, my Sentinel. I understand now, and I agree. I love you, Jim, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this chance to prove it. It's more than I ever expected, and I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate it.

"I'm ready now, Jim. Let's do it!"

Unbelievably grateful for his Guide's courage, Jim hugged the smaller man to him for a moment longer, then turned them both to face the open doors once again.

And this time they entered, walking slowly hand in hand as they approached the flower-covered dais where Adam Kingsley awaited them, flanked by Simon and his son Daryl who were acting as groomsmen for the occasion.

As they progressed down the aisle, Blair caught glimpses of more flowers and many smiling faces, most of whom he recognised, although it had to be said that he was more than a little distracted at the time and the gathering blurred into the background to a great extent. A proud and happy Eli Stoddard stood next to Janice, his secretary, and others from Rainier, including several of Blair's students and many of the young man's friends and colleagues. Major Crimes was represented by Rhonda, Megan, Joel, H and Rafe, and Blair could see a surprisingly large contingent from the rest of the PD, including their friend from Homicide, the gentle giant, Dan Brown.

There were also many representatives from the Sentinel / Guide Department itself, and many Sentinel and Guide pairs with whom Blair was already well acquainted, including those who also worked in other units within the PD, such as Sentinel Detective Mary Kelly and her Guide, Stewart Carlson; Sentinel Detective Mick Kavanagh and Guide Eddy Francis and Sentinel Detective Ralph Smithson and his wife and Guide, Stephanie.

Then they were standing in front of the beaming Director Kingsley, and Blair felt himself begin to tremble again until Jim's warm hand squeezed his own smaller one supportively, and he calmed again, shooting his lover a grateful glance and immensely comforted by the affection and approval he saw in Jim's eyes.

The ceremony itself was very straightforward, and conducted with tact and sympathy by Adam Kingsley. Relatively short, but tasteful in content, Blair repeated the requisite phrases almost on autopilot, so overwhelmed was he with the sense of occasion and his own burgeoning emotions. He knew that Jim was feeling much of the same, if to a rather lesser extent since he had known what to expect, but the love in Blair's heart for the tall Sentinel at his side seemed to expand unbelievably even more until he felt that every atom of his being was suffused with pure, unadulterated adoration.

And then the moment came for the exchange of rings, and Simon and Daryl stepped forward proudly to do the honours.

As Jim slipped the simple gold band onto Blair's finger, and Blair reciprocated - albeit with a slightly shaking hand - their audience erupted with a spontaneous burst of applause.

With eyes only for each other they leaned in to seal their vows with a kiss, and then something wonderful happened. As their lips touched, it seemed as if a current of pure energy arced between them, and they were instantly transported to a jungle clearing.

Thoroughly bewildered, Blair gazed around him, seeing that he was standing at the edge of the open space. Opposite him on the far side stood Jim, yet not Jim. This Jim was dressed as a warrior, tall and proud and every inch a tribal Sentinel. And Blair knew that this magnificent warrior -; this lover -; was his and his alone.

And for Jim the sight before him was equally amazing. Blair stood, gazing at him with a passion and desire that was almost hungry. A version of Blair unlike any other he had seen before. This Blair was dressed as a shaman, his body lean but strong. Unmarked save for painted tribal symbols, the long hair adorned with beads and feathers, this was Blair as he should be, and Jim revelled in the sight.

Suddenly everything changed again, and both men began to shimmer and drop down as they morphed into their animal spirits, Jim's sleek black jaguar turning to look into the amazing blue eyes of Blair's beautiful silver timber wolf.

And as one they began to run across the open space towards each other, leaping at the last moment to merge in a brilliant flash of light. And this time there was no holding back on either part. They knew each other as they always should have done; as they had in the past, and always would from now on.

Alpha Sentinel and Alpha Shaman Guide as one. Two halves of one soul forever.

Although there was little to indicate what was happening in the eyes of their onlookers, everyone present seemed to know that something momentous had just occurred. *Mundanes* and sensitives alike felt the brief surge of power and love between their friends, and were happy for them. Later some would recall seeing a glow surrounding the pair as they kissed, and knew they had witnessed something more than a simple wedding ceremony.

And as for Blair and Jim, as they broke their kiss and drew apart to look into each other's eyes, both read the truth within, and basked in the sure knowledge that nothing and no one would ever part them again.

And for the first time in his life, Blair truly believed that at last all was as it should be.

THE END.
