



The Road Less Traveled

by magician

Jim Ellison and Joel Taggart were making their report to Captain Sarah Finkelman, who was filling in for Simon Banks, Captain of the Major Crime Division of the Cascade Police Department. Simon was recovering from being shot by the international assassin, Kurt Zeller, in his own office. Zeller had been hired to kill a local union leader, but he also had an ax to grind with Ellison, who foiled his last job and sent him to prison. Although the blood had been cleaned and the broken glass replaced, the memory of the attack was sharp. Knowing that Simon and Inspector Megan Connor had been injured by the bullet that was meant for him made Jim sick with guilt and anger. Simon wasn't just his boss; he was a good friend.

Joel was recounting how they'd spotted Zeller walking into a gun shop earlier in the day and how, as they approached the building, it had blown up.

"Arson boys say the explosion was deliberately rigged," Jim added. "Set off by some gunpowder stored in the back."

Joel nodded. "The body's burned beyond recognition. The M.E. thinks it could be two days until we get a positive ID. But we saw Zeller walk in minutes before it exploded. It has to be him. You know Roger Haber's missing, too?"

"You think Haber took Zeller out in order to cut his links to Gunderson?" Jim asked Joel. "Took the dough from the hit and he's on permanent vacation somewhere?" Joel nodded.

Rafe poked his head into the office. "Jim, you've got a phone call. They say it's urgent."

"Captain?"

"Go," said Finkelman. "It might be about Zeller."

Jim walked to his desk and picked up the phone. "Ellison."

"Jim, you've got to stop Blair."

Jim grimaced when he heard Naomi Sandburg's voice. She had breezed into town to visit her son, Blair, and had ended up causing major problems for them with some well-intentioned meddling. He was having difficulty containing his anger with her. "Naomi, I don't have time for this. I'm in the middle of a case and--"

"He's going to commit suicide!"

"What? Blair would never take his own life."

"His academic life. His career. He's going to hold a press conference at Rainier. I saw his notes. He's going to call his thesis fraudulent. To fix what I did. To fix things for you. If he does that, he won't be able to get a job at any university--or any job that requires integrity. Do you get it now? He's doing it because he loves you more than he loves his own future--his own life."

Jim cursed silently. He used to be able to stuff his emotions away so he could focus on the job. The last few days had him feeling raw. Anger and guilt and embarrassment swirled just under the surface and he felt a hair's breadth away from losing it. But what Naomi was describing needed an immediate response. "When is the press conference?" Even as he asked, he had his phone out, speed-dialing Blair's cell. It went directly to voicemail.

"I'm not sure. He left about ten minutes ago."

"Try to find him and stop him. I'm heading to Rainier now." Jim left the bullpen at a run and took the stairs to the truck. As he got behind the wheel, he dialed the Anthropology Department. Jean Simpson, the Department's office assistant, answered the phone. "Jean? This is Jim Ellison. Is Blair there? Has he started his press conference?"

"Jim, what's going on? There are reporters milling around and bigwigs everywhere, including Chancellor Edwards."

"Please, Jean. Has Blair started?"

"No, it's set for about thirty minutes from now. Blair hasn't arrived yet."

"I'm on my way there. Please get to Blair as soon as he arrives and get him to delay. Tell him... tell him to wait until I get there. Tell him I want to talk with him. It's important."

"Okay, Jim." She hesitated. "Come in through the west entrance. You can get to my office without passing the crowd."

"Thanks, Jean," Jim said sincerely, as he started the engine. He disconnected and stepped on the gas.

"Jim, what are you doing here?" Blair demanded, looking as anxious as Jim felt.

"Trying to stop you from throwing away your career before you think it through."

"I *have* thought this through. It's the only way to give you back your anonymity. I'm responsible for..." Blair paused and swallowed hard. "For betraying you by not hiding your identity. That was my professional responsibility to my informant. I don't belong in Anthropology if I can't follow the basic precepts."

"But Naomi said if you do this you won't be able to get any type of decent job, ever."

"She shouldn't have called you. She shouldn't have interfered."

Jim hated this, but his sense of justice pushed him. He placed his hands on Blair's shoulders, as much to communicate as to get his attention. "Blair, I know you feel guilty over what you did and what Naomi did. You want this all to go away and I do, too."

Blair flinched and tried to pull away. Jim held on as he continued. "But you've got to listen to me. When... when Alex got between us, you said we both made mistakes. We were each doing what we thought was right; following our instincts. But what we did wrong was not working it out together. If we had, maybe you wouldn't have..." Jim swallowed, still unable to say the word 'died'. "I know I've pushed you away, but maybe it's not too late to figure out what to do about this."

Blair looked at Jim with a mixture of pain and hope. "Do you think we can?"

"I don't know, Chief." Jim didn't miss the flash of longing in Blair's eyes when he used the nickname. "But why don't we get out of here and try?"

"But what about the press conference?"

"Screw those jackals. Let them work for their story." With that, Jim poked his head outside the office. Jean gave him a thumbs-up and he led Blair out the same way he came in.

Once they were safely in the truck, Blair spoke up. "Naomi has a lawyer friend. She got a judge to issue a cease and desist order against Sid and Berkshire to prevent them from releasing any more of the diss. She also got a gag order so they can't comment on anything, even if they're questioned by the press or another lawyer. I know it doesn't help what's already out there, but it'll stop them from making it worse. She's started legal proceedings against Berkshire Publishing for theft of intellectual property."

Jim started the truck. Blair looked out the window as they exited the university parking lot. "She also got a C&D and gag against Rainier. Because I didn't turn in my thesis, they shouldn't have talked about it to anyone." Blair looked at his watch. "The papers should be delivered to the Chancellor just about now. I think she's going to hate me worse than ever, but it had to be done."

Jim whistled. "That's good thinking, Chief. I should've thought of that myself. My dad's got some pretty sharp lawyers. They might've been able to cut this off sooner." He sighed. "Spilled milk."

Jim's phone rang. "Ellison."

"Detective, where are you?"

"Sorry, Captain. I had a personal emergency."

"Need I remind you that we've got a big problem with Bartley and we're running short-handed?"

"I know, Captain. The problem is that with all this publicity I'm being hounded by the press. I can't do my job like this. We already missed Zeller because of it."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"I'm going to officially lay low to avoid the reporters. Use my contacts to see if I can do some good."

"Alright. We're waiting on confirmation of the identity of the body in the gun shop. If it's Zeller, we can let Bartley have his rally."

"I just don't believe our luck is that good."

"Always the optimist, eh Detective? Keep in touch. Oh, one more thing. What about Mr. Sandburg?"

"Officially, he's out of this. Unofficially, he can be useful. Since, as you say, we're short-handed, we need as much help as we can get."

"Well, I have to admit he proved useful last time. Since Banks kept him on, I'll let it go. I'm out."

Jim turned to Blair. "You ready to roll?" Blair could only nod.

They stopped by the loft to pick up Naomi's car. Despite the "Save the Whales" sticker, they figured it was less conspicuous than either Jim's truck or Blair's Volvo. Blair took the time to reassure Naomi and to change to hiking boots, since they were going to meet with Jim's snitch, Sneaks. He was notorious for demanding some of his payment in top-of-the-line sneakers and Blair had already lost one pair of Nikes to him.

Despite not getting his favorite bonus, Sneaks was indeed helpful. Word on the street matched what Jim suspected: Zeller had not been killed in the gun shop explosion. When Sneaks broached the subject of Jim's "superpowers", a patented Ellison glare--and a twenty-dollar bill for the info--shut him up.

As they got back in the car, Jim dialed his cell phone. "Captain, this is Ellison. My sources say Zeller is probably still alive."

"Good sources. The coroner just positively ID'd that body. It was Roger Haber."

"Zeller's been ahead of us for most of this operation. I think we have to assume he knows Bartley's alive. We've been discussing a way to draw him out. We're coming in to conference."

"Okay. Just come in through the garage to avoid the press."

Although the meeting was a little awkward, the air heavy with unasked questions, everyone soon focused on the job at hand. Since Bartley volunteered to be the bait, their priorities were keeping him alive and catching Zeller. They decided to set up a fake press conference at Union Hall the next day. It would give them enough time to case the place and set the story in the news, but not too much time for Zeller, a thorough planner, to prepare.

Leaving the others to finalize transporting Bartley and setting up the security force, Jim and Blair went to Union Hall. They scoured it from top to bottom, assessing the most likely places Zeller would enter and set up, getting Jim used to all the sounds and smells, filtering out the extraneous. Knowing how explosive the situation could become, they carefully set the trap with extra uniformed officers and plain clothes acting the parts of the press.

The day's activities had kept both men busy and distracted, but after leaving Union Hall, there was nothing left for Jim and Blair to do but head home. Getting into Naomi's car only reminded them of the disarray their personal lives were in, and how much of that fell on her shoulders. Despite Blair's earlier assurances to her that he still loved her despite what she'd done, he wasn't sure how much he actually *liked* his mother at the moment. And while Jim found it easier to take his anger out at Blair over the situation, his annoyance at what he considered a bone-head move on her part was keeping his anger at a simmer.

So it was with considerable relief that they entered an empty loft. Jim could smell that Naomi had been gone for several hours. He jerked his head toward the kitchen counter, indicating an envelope addressed to Blair. Blair opened it; Jim's eyes could easily read Naomi's handwriting:

*Blair,
I'm staying at Lily's tonight. Call me when you get in so I know you're alright.
Love, Mom*

Blair sighed, then turned to Jim. "Jim, we need to talk about--"

"Sandburg, we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow and I'm beat." He paused when he saw the evident hurt on Blair's face and softened his tone. "I know there's a lot more to deal with, but I just can't do anything more tonight. Let's get through capturing Zeller first, okay?" At Blair's nod, he continued, "Call your mom, Chief. I'm going to hit the sack." With that, Jim headed to the bathroom.

Blair dialed the number.

"Blair?"

"Yeah, Mom, it's me."

"Is everything okay? You've been gone for so long."

"We were working on a case."

"*You and Jim? That's wonderful, Sweetie. That means that you're back together? That everything's alright?*"

"I don't know yet. We've got a lot to talk over and work out." Blair couldn't keep the discouragement out of his voice. "I just don't know, Ma. I can't talk about it right now."

"*Oh, Blair...*" He could hear she was on the verge of tears, but didn't have the energy to console her when he was in so much need himself. "*Get some rest, sweetie. I'll talk to you tomorrow.*"

"Okay, Mom. Goodnight." He disconnected without waiting for her to say anything more. He then went to his room, stripped down to his underwear and fell into bed.

From his room, Jim heard both sides of the conversation clearly; could hear the obvious pain and despair. His own hurt was overwhelming him, and it stopped Jim from offering Blair any comfort. But it took him hours to get to sleep.

The next day, the Union Hall operation was set, everyone in their places. Tensions were palpable as Bartley was hustled into place but, in the end, it was anti-climactic. Zeller showed up exactly where Jim predicted. Jim orchestrated the capture while staying undercover and Brown and Rafe got the official collar. Bartley was a little pissed that it was a fake news conference, but was mollified when the press were allowed in two hours later. He and his followers provided enough hoopla to distract the reporters from asking the whereabouts of Detective James Ellison.

Jim and Blair took the opportunity to visit Simon in the hospital. Although he was out of danger, he was far from recovered. He looked gray and tired, both from his wounds and the worries of the last few days. He and Jim both knew that the Police Chief was pressing for full disclosure and that Internal Affairs would certainly get involved.

"Well, Jim, I guess congratulations are in order," Simon said. "Zeller arrested without a shot fired and Bartley safe and sound and his usual blowhard self."

"Thank you, sir. It was definitely a group effort."

"Yes, Sarah is going to pass around congratulations to the entire team. I expect there might be some commendations as well." Simon looked at them. "Well, have you two worked things out between you? I'm hoping the answer is 'yes' and that you have a solution that will keep me from being demoted to beat cop."

Blair looked down, guilt and embarrassment preventing him from talking.

"Simon, I just don't see how to put the genie back in the bottle here," Jim answered. "Blair was going to try."

"How?"

"He was going to denounce his work as fake to get the press to believe the whole thing was a deception."

Simon looked appraisingly at Blair, who was still studying his shoes.

"There's problems with that, though. For one thing, he'd probably be thrown out of the university as a result. You know Edwards has been gunning for him since the Ventriss case. If he's thrown out of Rainier, he won't be able to work in any other university or complete his doctorate. It's a heavy price to pay and ultimately unfair, since his work isn't fraudulent."

Jim sighed. "The fact is, despite my wanting to go back to the way I was, there's really no going back. If I hadn't used my senses today, if Blair hadn't been by my side helping me to maximize them, we probably wouldn't have caught Zeller peacefully. These senses, as much as they are a pain, have helped protect this city." Blair made a barely perceptible sound that caught Jim's attention. *How long have you been waiting for me to admit that, Chief?*

Jim walked to stand next to Blair and turned toward Simon. "What's more, I've been careless in hiding them. Remember the Juno case? There was a roomful of people in that courtroom, including a judge and two lawyers, who heard me say I saw Juno from an impossible distance. I backed off on admitting it then, but now that this has happened, someone is going to remember that testimony. The next time I get on a stand, someone might ask me about my senses and I can't lie under oath."

Simon opened his mouth, but Jim held up a hand to stop him. "And what about when I smelled that pond water in front of Carolyn? She's going to see this in the papers and remember that. Are we going to ask her to lie if someone questions her? What about if you're questioned under oath? There has to be another solution."

"Well, Jim, that's the longest speech I've ever heard out of you." Simon studied his best detective and friend. "When you lay it out like that, I have to admit what we've been doing to cover up your senses probably won't work any longer. Do you have any ideas on what to do?"

Jim turned to Blair. "Chief?"

"Well," Blair said hesitantly, "Jim and I were talking about this on our way here. We have several issues. First is dealing with defense attorneys wanting to dismiss cases Jim was on because he might've used his senses to solve a case. One thing we were always really careful about was to make sure there was physical evidence that could have been discovered by any forensic technician. So, the evidence that actually convicted each criminal is solid."

"Well, thank heaven for small mercies," Simon said. "Even so, I expect we'll be dealing with appeals for a long time." He sighed. "What else?"

"Well, the next is trickier. What to do about Internal Affairs, because they already don't like Jim." Blair shot Jim an apologetic look. "We think the biggest issue is if they think that Jim is somehow cheating, doing something illegal."

"Okay."

"Well, I've got all the scientific data, all the results of testing that show how sensitive Jim's senses are. If they don't want to accept my findings, they could set up testing by an independent lab. Jim's senses can be objectively measured and they outperform any surveillance equipment currently available. So, there's no way he would have used anything illegal to enhance his performance. Why would he bother?"

"But couldn't they make the case that Jim using his senses, which are so far above the average, would be illegal?"

"No, because it's natural. It's like saying a sprinter who gets off the starting block quicker because he has better reflexes is cheating. Jim is using a natural ability."

"But Jim isn't an athlete. Using his gifts for his job has legal consequences."

"Yes, but police use enhancements already that don't require a warrant," Blair answered, his voice getting stronger as he mustered his argument. "For example, no one would question if a cop uses binoculars or a rifle scope or even night vision goggles to see something. Jim's eyesight is just like using those things that currently don't require a court order."

Blair looked a little nervously at Jim before continuing. "And we no longer question using dogs to do police work. Not that I'm comparing you to a dog, Jim," Blair hurried to add. Jim nodded his understanding. "My point is that because they have a superior sense of smell, dogs were accepted and used for tracking for a long time. But I bet the first time a cadaver dog was used to locate a shallow grave, the murderer's defense attorney objected. Then they proved that the dog did it through its own natural ability. It probably took a few appeals before it became generally accepted, but now we have K9 units."

Simon looked down as he mulled this over, then looked up at Blair and nodded.

Blair could see Simon was about to say something, so he hurried to get his point across. "The only reason it hasn't been accepted in humans is that no one has proved the ability, even though I've documented hundreds of cases of people who use significantly enhanced senses in their jobs. Perfume sniffers and coffee tasters and piano tuners. No one considers them cheaters when they use their enhanced senses on the job; they're just people who are using a natural faculty to their best advantage."

Blair stopped, dry-mouthed, and poured a glass of water. He gauged Simon's reactions as he took a long drink. Sitting down in a chair next to the bed, he looked at Simon directly for the first time. "Now, there's your situation, Simon. Trying to explain why you didn't tell the Chief about Jim. I think it could be easier than you think. Since nothing Jim did with his senses was illegal, and it's his personal business, there was no reason to disclose it to anyone. The only reason to explain it to you was because I needed the ride-along to help Jim understand and control them. If he didn't need me, there was no obligation for him to tell anyone and every reason not to."

Blair hitched forward in the chair, his stare getting more intense. "As we saw from this... situation, they are easily misunderstood. Furthermore, we know that Jim's sensitivities can be used against him; if it got out, he could be targeted by criminals," he said, his voice getting stronger and deeper. "It's been our worst fear. So, there was every reason to keep them secret and no reason to share with even one other person, because then you're starting down a slippery slope where Jim's life could be in danger."

Despite his exhaustion, Simon opened his mouth to ask a question when the nurse chose that moment to come in. "Time for your visitors to leave, Captain. I'm checking your vitals and then it's dinnertime."

Knowing they were not nearly done but seeing Simon's weariness, Jim said, "We're going to grab some dinner, too. We'll be back later to continue. Maybe we can firm up how to deal with Chief Warren."

As they left the hospital, Blair called Naomi to invite her to dinner. She begged off, saying she was eating with friends and wouldn't be back until the following day. Both men breathed a sigh of relief, appreciating her tact. Before ringing off, Naomi let Blair know that his lawyer had called and wanted him to call her back.

Still wary of the press, they decided to drive out of town to an older diner they'd enjoyed in the past. They ordered and then Blair called his lawyer.

"Lily? Blair. How'd things go?" He heard her chuckle.

"Well, you've got Berkshire shaking in their boots. They're disavowing Sid, saying he went rogue and that isn't how they do business, et cetera. In the meantime, they're abiding by the court orders. I think when the smoke clears you could be looking at a large settlement personally and one for Detective Ellison, if he's interested. It would be an easy thing to show actual damages to himself and his ability to do his job as a result of Sid's actions."

"Wow. That's unexpected, but in a good way. How'd it go at Rainier?"

"A little rockier. I got the impression that no one normally tells Chancellor Edwards what she can or can't do."

Blair snorted. "You have no idea."

"Well, I explained the situation in detail to Dr. Madsen and she got Dr. Stoddard involved. The three of us sat down with Edwards to lay out some home truths. The upshot is she'll be on a long-overdue vacation for the next week and her office has an official 'no comment' policy to any questions."

"Wow," Blair said, in an awed voice.

"Madsen and Stoddard would like to talk to you, but I'm suggesting you hold off on any contact for now. I've filed paperwork with the Anthro Department informing them of your absence for the foreseeable future. Since the semester is over and you're still officially working on your doctorate, it's a non-issue, but it will cover you if there's any blow back."

Blair was doing his best not to choke up. "Lily, I don't know how to begin to thank you for this." He blew out a shaky breath. "When the dust settles, I'm going to find a way."

"Honey, I look forward to seeing you on the other side of this mess. I never cease to be amazed at how people misuse their power. It's going to be a pleasure to nail these bozos. Get some rest, Blair, and we'll talk again in the next couple of days."

"Thanks, Lily. You're a pearl beyond price. Bye." He looked up at Jim. "You heard all that?"

Jim nodded, but before he could speak the waitress arrived with their food. "Why don't we eat and then try to get some rest. I'm bushed." They ate quietly, each lost in his own thoughts.

Considering the hour, they decided against returning to the hospital that night and instead headed to the loft. Mercifully, there were no reporters hanging around. They went through their evening routine by rote; each taking a shower and preparing for bed. Before entering his room, Blair turned to Jim and said, "Thanks, Jim, for everything." He quietly closed the door and Jim heard him get into bed.

As Jim headed up the stairs, his gut still churned with all the uncertainty that lay ahead. The only thing he was certain of was that he'd done the right thing in not letting his friend fall on his sword. As he climbed into bed, he said, softly, "Same to you, Chief."

For the first time in years, Jim didn't wake to his internal clock. It was the phone which disturbed his rest. He checked the time: 7:30 a.m. Expecting it was Finkelman, he got up and headed downstairs. As he was about to pick up, the answering machine went off.

"Detective Ellison, this is Don Hass from KCDE News. I'm calling for your reaction to the curious suppression of any information on the manuscript 'The Sentinel by Blair Sandburg' published by Berkshire Publishing. As you know, Berkshire had been releasing excerpts but then yesterday stopped entirely. When asked about this unusual situation, a Berkshire spokesman said he had no knowledge of the manuscript and no further comment on it. When I contacted Rainier University, I was told by a spokeswoman for Chancellor Marie Edwards that she had no personal knowledge, had no comment and that the Chancellor has left town on vacation and was unreachable. I hope you can shed some light on this confusing state of affairs. You can reach me anytime at 555-3289."

Jim snorted as he listened. Don Hass was a reporter at the local TV station and a perennial thorn in his side. It would be a cold day in hell before he would voluntarily talk to the guy. Jim started the coffee maker and then jumped in the shower.

As he came down the stairs after getting dressed, Jim noticed that Blair was still asleep. He poked his head in Blair's bedroom door and called out a first wake-up call. Blair stirred enough to prove he was alive, but little else. Jim poured another cup of coffee and checked in with Finkelman.

"Zeller is up for arraignment this morning. We've got him on conspiracy to commit murder for Bartley and attempted murder against Simon and Inspector Connor, since we were able to match that bullet to his rifle. Since you and Joel saw him go into that gun shop, we're going to see if we can connect him to Haber's death as well, but that might take some time."

"How about the press?"

"Not nearly as many and they seem more interested in how we captured a notorious international assassin without firing a shot. No one has asked about your whereabouts except for Don Hass. Things are looking up."

"Well, that's a relief. We're going to meet with Captain Banks at the hospital to discuss the repercussions of my situation. I'll come by the station to deliver our statements sometime today."

"No hurry. Just keep me in the loop."

"Will do, Captain, thanks."

Jim raised his voice. "Sandburg! Time to wake up!" He rattled Blair's door. "Come on, Chief, up and at 'em. "

"Okay, okay, I'm up," came the grumpy reply. Jim grinned and went to the kitchen to pour Blair a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," Blair said, accepting the cup and taking a large gulp. "How much time do I have to get ready?"

"Take your time," Jim answered. "I'm going to start breakfast. Then we can lay out today's plan."

"So, where are we going first?" asked Blair as they ate.

"We have to turn in our statements from yesterday, but since we weren't part of the bust, Finkelman said we can do that anytime. So, I thought we'd stop by the hospital and see how Simon's doing. Continue to strategize."

Blair nodded, then got up and went into his room. He came back with a notebook, which he handed to Jim. "I started a, uh, crib sheet for Simon, to help him when he talks to the Chief."

"This is thorough. When did you get a chance to do this?"

Blair shrugged. "I had a little trouble getting to sleep. Anyway, I figured you should see and approve this before we give it to Simon. To make any changes if you want and, you know, if the Chief wants to talk to you. You'll be on the same page." Blair gusted out a breath. "Jim, we've been dancing around this for days. Have you thought about your situation?"

"I've been a little busy, Chief, but it has crossed my mind."

"Even after this stops being front page news and we survive appeals and I.A., you won't be able to do your job the same way. For one thing, you won't be able to go undercover any longer."

"Well, I think after the prison fiasco, that became kind of obvious."

"And all the reasons you wanted to keep this a secret before are still valid. Someone who knows how to use the senses against you, like Brackett did, is a real issue. I know you don't zone anymore, but spikes are a reality and I'm not sure how to protect you from them." Blair ran his hands through his hair in frustration. "Maybe you could learn how to dial back quicker, to head off being incapacitated, or--"

"Whoa, whoa, Chief, calm down."

"I can't calm down, Jim. This is exactly the reason I needed to keep your secret. I fucked up and I don't know how to keep you safe anymore." Blair fled the table for the balcony, looking out over the ocean.

Jim came over to stand behind Blair, speaking softly. "Blair, the reality is that I'm not in a safe job. Now, we can't ignore this or wish it away; we have to deal with it. You've been there for me and pulled me out of a lot of crazy situations these last few years. You're smart and imaginative. I think between us we can figure it out. But I need you to keep it together so you can think straight. Okay?"

Blair nodded, then sighed. "I know you'll probably hate this, but it would be better if you weren't lead detective on all these high-profile cases."

"Explain."

Blair turned to look at Jim. "Well, think about it. If the bad guys know you're on their case, it'd be easier for them to set a trap. If a team is relying on your lead and you get taken out, others could get hurt."

"So, you don't think I can continue being a cop?"

"No, that's *not* what I'm saying. I just don't think you can do it in the same way you're used to. Up 'til now, you've been using your senses to help you solve the cases Simon assigns to you."

"Yeah...and?"

"And you only used them on your own cases because it was important to keep them a secret. But if there was a way to get you certified, so you could use them openly, you could be helping the entire department solve cases."

"By doing what? Being a live forensics lab?" Jim scowled at the thought.

"No." Blair walked back inside and Jim followed, trying to be patient about what he expected would be bad news. "You'd be an official consultant. Think about it, man. You already do it. Remember when Rafe was working on that drug ring? You knew which warehouse because you smelled the drugs. But you pointed him there by telling him you'd gotten a tip from Sneaks. And you dropped some hints to Joel that helped him bust that underage sweatshop." Blair started to pace, building up steam. "How much more effective would everyone be if they could come to you openly? By helping everyone I'll bet the closure rate would be so high you'd be worth your weight in gold. The only difference is that you wouldn't be in the, you know, car chasing part."

Blair stopped at the balcony windows and looked out. "Of course, you wouldn't need me as much," he said, his voice lower and softer. "You'd finally have your independence back."

Jim stood behind Blair again, but this time he put his hands on his friend's slumped shoulders. "Blair, I'll admit that when we started this, I thought it would be short-term. You'd teach me control and I'd give you what you needed for your paper and we'd go our separate ways. When you were considering taking the Borneo offer, you thought that I was ready to go it alone, and maybe I was. But these last years, it's been so much more than simply controlling them. You've helped me learn how to innovate and figured things out on the fly. You've backed me up with nothing but a well-thrown baseball and you've used your knowledge of people to help us profile criminals. You've even helped me to enjoy these damn things instead of just tolerating them. I don't think I'll ever stop needing you, and I sure don't want to find out."

Blair took a deep breath and let it out and Jim felt Blair's body relax. He turned around to look at Jim with a crooked grin. "Boy, Simon was right. You've gotten downright loquacious lately," he teased.

"Well, don't get used to it. Now, come on. None of us are sure we'll still have jobs tomorrow, so let's go see our boss."

When they arrived, Simon was in a wheelchair and looking considerably better. He read through Blair's list and nodded. "This will do nicely. In deference to my injuries, Warren's given me until I leave the hospital to explain myself." He snorted. "It's more likely with the press diverted to the Zeller case, his fat is out of the fire. He's been busy since yesterday praising our boys in blue and preening."

"Politics never changes, Sir. I hope you'll tell the Chief how pleased we were to capture Zeller for his benefit."

Simon rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right." Simon straightened up in his chair and looked at the two men who not only worked for him but had become his friends. "You've had some time since yesterday to think on this some more. Jim, are you sure you want to go forward with formally revealing your senses?"

"Simon, I just don't see any way around it. It'll be uncomfortable at first, but if we can get over the hurdles we talked about yesterday, there could be some advantages."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one thing, with everyone knowing, I could use them more openly. I could get called in by the other detectives right at the beginning of a case when the evidence is the freshest. They'd know what I can do. It also might take away a little animosity. You know Rafe sometimes gets his nose out of joint with our closure rate. I don't blame him, but there's sometimes tension. If I consulted with him, he could be the new hotshot."

"You wouldn't mind?"

"Simon, you know I never wanted the glory, only to get the job done. Besides," Jim continued hesitantly, with a quick glance at Blair, "I might need to step aside anyway as a lead detective. If criminals found out how to incapacitate me because of the senses, I'd be a target. That means everyone around me could be a target. I'd have to change some of the ways I work in the field."

"Things were a lot simpler when you were our best-kept secret." Simon blew out a breath. "I think we should meet with Beverly Sanchez. Since she's now the District Attorney, she'll call the shots on all the legal hoops we're going to have to jump through. Sarah said Beverly has called the office, but she's been side-stepping to buy us some time."

"Beverly's smart and, more importantly, she's fair. When should we meet?"

"What about now?" Simon replied, pointing to the door, which Blair opened. Jim wheeled Simon past the nurse's station to a waiting area, where Beverly Sanchez, looking every bit the quintessential professional, was reading a file. She glanced up at their approach and rose, giving them a rueful smile. "Jim, Blair, I'd like to say it's great to see you again, but I'm looking at mountains of overtime in my future. It's a good thing I like you two." She gave them each a hug. "The nurse is giving us the meeting room at the end of the hall. My assistant is sending over coffee and Danishes. Let's get started."

As they sat around the table, asking and answering questions, Jim thought this had to be one of the most thorough debriefs he'd ever attended. Sanchez came well-prepared with facts, legal roadblocks, and insightful questions. He was also impressed with her attitude. He never felt that he was freakish, as he had in other circumstances. After two hours, she called a halt, ready to summarize.

"Gentlemen, I think I have enough to go forward with. Simon, you look like you're ready for a pain pill, so I think we should conclude."

"Before focusing on Jim's situation, I want to give you some legal advice for your meeting with the Chief. Simon, what Blair says is true. Jim's physical capabilities are his own business to share or not to share, as long as they don't interfere with the performance of his job. An example would be if he were color-blind and was a copier repairman. As long as he worked on black-and-white copiers, there would be no reason to let anyone

know. If his manager wanted him to be trained on color copiers, only then would he have to disclose. But the president of the copier company doesn't need to be informed."

Beverly stood up, as did Jim and Blair, and she crossed her arms. "The consequences of disclosure in Jim's situation are much more dire. Jim has already been ridiculed as a result of this exposure, even if the perpetrators thought it was good-natured ribbing. There's a real danger that anyone with a dog whistle or a bottle of strong perfume could use that as a weapon against him. That's more than enough reason to keep those who need to know to an absolute minimum. If you have any trouble with the legalities of withholding Jim's private information from the Chief or any other higher-up, you can call me."

Beverly moved close to Jim. "Jim, this is still new, but I expect the appeals to start coming in pretty quickly. The higher-paid lawyers will be first in line. Fortunately, appeals take time. As they come in, I'll expect to see you about the evidence-gathering. The better solution to taking them on one at a time is to get your senses assessed so we know just how strong they are. Then, I want to talk about certifying you in the same way that other people with sensory gifts get certified." She placed her hand on Jim's arm, eliciting a small smile. "Believe it or not, there is a precedent. A person with perfect pitch was legally certified as a subject matter expert on sound. He's been used in civil cases, mostly for music plagiarism, but the precedent is there. We can figure out the nuts and bolts of getting you certified with as many senses as possible." Jim nodded.

Beverly then turned to Blair. "I know you think this doesn't involve you directly, since you were a ride-along with no official police standing, but I disagree. Blair, you've been studying people with sensory variations in general, and Jim specifically, for years. As we work to convince the courts that Jim's senses are not only naturally acquired through genetics, but are indeed part of the bell-curve distribution of what is considered normal for humans, your expertise could be invaluable.

"But to do that, you need as much gravitas as possible. Right now, you're ABD. I'm advising you to fast-track your PhD. Of course, if what Berkshire has is your actual diss, it would invalidate it for submission. Can you square things with your committee, or do you need to look outside of Rainier to make this happen?"

Blair stared at her, open-mouthed. "I'd been so busy helping Jim that I didn't have an end date for my defense. My advisor is also a committee member, and she's been pretty lenient so far." Blair walked over to the window and looked out as he continued. "You should know that because of this situation, my lawyer has filed a C&D and gag order on both Berkshire and Rainier. When the excitement generated by Berkshire's actions was echoed by Chancellor Edwards, my lawyer considered Rainier's actions to be..." Blair turned to look at her. "Not to my benefit."

"And your lawyer probably advised you to avoid contact with them?"

"Yeah. But I'll explain this new situation to her and see if we can get this resolved."

Beverly gathered her papers. "Alright, gentlemen, we've all got our tasks to do. Call if anything urgent comes up, otherwise let's plan to meet again in," she checked her calendar, "a week from today?" The others nodded and she left.

"Well, it's almost lunch time," Jim said as he wheeled Simon back to his room. "Simon, can you handle some real food? How about a pastrami special from Langer's? We could get food to go and meet you back here in about an hour?"

"Sounds good to me. Throw in an extra pickle and their brown mustard, but skip the fries."

"No fries?" Blair teased. "There's hope for you yet, Simon."

"It's only temporary, Sandburg. My stomach is still recovering and I think the pastrami will be enough for today."

"Let's go, Chief, before Simon dies of hunger." Jim handed Blair his jacket. "By the way, Simon, I know we're shorthanded, but I'd kind of like to get out of town for a few days. Before we're buried in all this. I was going to ask the Captain when we drop by the station."

"You might as well go, Jim. Sarah's already had a call from Sheila Irwin. Internal Affairs doesn't want you working on any cases until they have a chance to examine what all of this means. You'll be on paid administrative leave for now. Just don't go far and keep in cell phone range." Simon looked at Jim, who was clenching his jaw in annoyance. "Now, Jim, take it easy. We expected this, so take it in stride. Because Connor's still out, we're getting help from the other departments. When you stop by the station to write your statements, just hand off any open cases to Joel and he'll get them handled."

Jim took a deep breath, making an obvious effort to relax. "Okay. See you soon."

Before they left for their fishing trip, Blair consulted with his lawyer and then had a private meeting with his advisor, Dr. Leigh Madsen, and Dr. Eli Stoddard, Department Head.

"Dr. Madsen, thanks for meeting me on such short notice. I've got to go out of town for a few days."

"Blair, please. I've been your advisor for years. I know things in the department have been a little strained, but I hope I'm still 'Leigh'."

Blair smiled slightly. "Okay, Leigh."

"I've asked Dr. Stoddard to stand in for Chancellor Edwards, since she's... indisposed."

Blair tentatively held out his hand, relieved when Stoddard immediately reached out to shake it. "Dr. Stoddard. I'd heard you'd returned from Borneo. I look forward to reading about your experiences."

Eli Stoddard looked at the young man he had once mentored with a tinge of sadness. "Blair, I understand now why you turned down that trip. I'm just sorry that things have turned out as they have."

"That's what I want to discuss today, Doc--Leigh. I've been advised that it would be better for me to get my PhD sooner rather than later. I need to know whether I can accomplish that at Rainier, or whether I need to find another university. I understand that my original dissertation topic will need to be changed."

"Frankly, Blair, how feasible is that?" Madsen asked with a small frown, her arms crossed. "You've been working on your current topic for years."

"Well, I guess it's obvious now that I was moving slowly because I hadn't worked out a way to protect my informant's identity," Blair said, looking down at his hands. "And while I wanted modern-day sentinels to be the subject of my doctoral thesis, the truth is I could never publish--the paper would have had to be sealed for the subject's safety."

Blair took a deep breath and looked up. *Make this your best pitch ever.* "Since working with the police, I've wanted to pursue a second doctorate, perhaps in Sociology. Through research and observations, I've gathered information that I think would be helpful to law enforcement agencies; information that I would want to have formally published. Since the sentinel paper was on the slow-track, so to speak, I've been working on this other thesis. I think it's close to completion. Assuming, that is, that I continue at Rainier and that the committee would allow me to change my subject."

"I'm surprised, to say the least, but don't keep us in suspense. What's it about?" Madsen asked.

Blair turned on his most persuasive lecture tone. "Well, as you both probably know, police departments tend to become their own sub-culture; a closed society, if you will. My paper describes how this sub-culture develops. You see, the police are assigned to protect the public. But part of the public are the criminals that the police have to track down and arrest. Over time, the police tend to become suspicious of everyone, which drives a wedge between them and the people they serve. John Q Public sees the police as protectors when they patrol his neighborhood to prevent robberies, but as bullies if a cop gives him a speeding ticket or arrests him for hitting his wife. The divide gets worse when there's a scandal, like when there's a bad cop. That reinforces a public perception that cops are untrustworthy."

As she listened, Madsen uncrossed her arms and leaned forward, a curious look replacing her frown. Blair noticed the changes in his adviser and he hurried on. "As it continues, the police feel unappreciated and misunderstood by the protectorate. So, they build a wall of insulation around themselves, doing things like dating other cops or only socializing with co-workers or giving a bad cop the benefit of the doubt, even with evidence to the contrary. They become their own little society that supports its members but at the same time isolates them.

"I developed questionnaires and held individual and group discussions. The results I've got so far seem to support my hypothesis. In their defense, I don't think they realize that it happens." Blair sat back in his chair and waited.

Dr. Madsen looked at Blair thoughtfully before speaking. "From what you've described, this does sound like a suitable thesis subject. Since it would work for cultural anthropology, it would be simpler to stay in this department. And, quite frankly, a doctorate in Anthropology looks more prestigious on paper than one in Sociology." She pulled out a calendar. "What time frame are you thinking?"

"I could have the introductory chapter ready as soon as I get back into town; in about a week?"

Madsen and Stoddard looked at each other and nodded. "Blair, I'm going to pull together a different committee for you, so we can start fresh. They can evaluate the intro chapter as soon as you hand it in. After that, I want to sit down with you to see the rest of your paper. Based on what's left to do, we can set a timetable to defense."

Dr. Stoddard said, "Blair, you've always been an asset to this university. I know there have been some issues with the Chancellor, but I hope to have them resolved once she returns. Under the circumstances, since you will need all your time to focus on this, I will not assign you any classes for the upcoming semester. Because this is short notice, you'll continue on the books as a Teaching Fellow and keep your office and stipend."

Stoddard started gathering up his papers. "Unless there's anything else, I think we're done for today," he said. With that, all three stood and left.

Jim smiled as he listened from Jean's office. *Well played, Blair.* As had become his habit, he slipped out the back way and headed to the truck.

One year later

In a small boat storage building down by the docks, Jim was pointing to places on a set of blueprints. "Here is where the group is meeting, in this room." He stopped to listen. "There are seven of them in there right now. The eighth is in the can over here. Here are the guards and these are the perimeters they're walking. They've been in place for just over an hour."

Lt. Walker from SWAT listened carefully, then checked with the surveillance van. "Have they started discussing business yet, Sweeney?"

"Not yet, sir. They've been mostly posturing; who gets what cut, who has the best product. Drinking and eating." There was a pause, then Sweeney spoke again. *"Okay. Sounds like they're about ready to get down to business. I'm thinking another 10 or 15 before we've got enough on tape."*

"Let me know when you've got it and I'll signal the bust."

"Roger that."

"You're positive about the firepower, Ellison?"

"Yeah. Sandburg and I cased the entire building. No explosives or large amounts of ammo. Just the smells associated with the guns these guys are carrying."

"Great. Okay," Walker spoke into his mic. "Everything's a go. Everyone move into final positions and wait for my signal." One by one, each team member responded. Jim spoke quietly into his own mic, updating the position of the guards as they moved.

Twenty minutes later, Sweeney confirmed they had enough on tape for the arrests. An hour beyond that the operation was in mop-up. Despite the late hour, the PD was a beehive of activity, especially in Vice and SWAT. Debriefings, interrogations, logging in evidence and the inevitable report-writing occupied the men and women. But underneath it all was the buzz of success--a mission well done, remarkably without a shot fired.

Jim and Blair commandeered a desk in the Vice squad room to write their reports. With his usual efficiency, Blair finished his report and sent it to the printer. He then picked up the phone and ordered pizza and wings from DaVinci's. With nothing else to do until the food came, he started throwing spitballs at Jim, who was pretending to ignore him. A booming voice coming from directly behind Blair almost startled him out of his chair.

"Sandburg, aren't you ever going to grow up?" growled Simon Banks, although there was a tinge of humor in the tone.

"Nope," Blair said with a grin. "Me and Peter Pan, man. What are you doing down here with the working class?"

"Very funny. I heard about the bust and came down to offer my congratulations."

"We've got food coming. Stay and enjoy."

"Now, you're talking. Let me make the rounds and I'll be back."

Jim watched his two friends as they bantered, realizing that, for the first time in months, he felt a deep sense of peace. Had it been a year since Naomi unintentionally created such chaos? It had been hard, but in the end easier than he expected. He finished his report, clicked on "print" and sat back, remembering everything that happened.

As soon as they'd returned to town and Blair handed in the introductory chapter of his new dissertation, Leigh Madsen proved to be as good as her word. Because of the subject matter, Dr. Anthony Phillips from Rainier's Criminal Justice Department, who also happened to be a former police chief from California, became one of the new dissertation committee members. Two associates from the Anthro department joined him. Madsen explained the situation to them, and they agreed to prioritize their review of Blair's thesis. She also assigned a TA to Blair to help him collect and organize the results from Blair's questionnaires and discussions, as well as double-checking and foot-noting Blair's source materials. That left Blair free to focus on writing and revisions. He successfully defended his dissertation an impressive six weeks later.

During those six weeks, the only thing that took precedence over Blair finishing his diss was helping Jim. He'd had his senses tested with top grade equipment that Blair, with his limited university resources, had never been able to access. As they went through each sense, Blair had been by his side, making sure the scientists were respectful and that they never caused Jim discomfort. The point, after all, was to define legal thresholds, not Jim's outer limits. Using those results, Blair compiled charts and graphs, adding in the results of hundreds of other subjects he'd studied over the years. He created a report that could be easily understood by lay people, which was the basis of what they would use when they went to court.

Simon was released from the hospital and had his meeting with the Chief. He used Blair's arguments and Beverly's legal opinions to excuse his keeping the Chief in the dark. He also pulled Jim's closure rates starting from the Switchman case, and pointed to the chaos that accidentally revealing Jim's abilities had created to bolster his case. The Chief harrumphed a bit, but in the end agreed that Simon had not broken any regulations and had, in fact, handled what was essentially a personnel issue in an ethical manner.

Sheila Irwin personally conducted the Internal Affairs investigation. After the way I.A. had treated Jim in previous situations, she made sure to be scrupulously fair and impartial. She requested a demonstration of what Jim always referred to as "stupid pet tricks", and was as impressed as anyone else who saw Jim display his gifts. She questioned Blair separately, not only as a subject matter expert but as an eye witness to some of Jim's cases. She concluded that, while it was up to a court to decide whether how Jim used his senses would be allowed in evidence, he had broken no regulations by using a "natural ability" in the performance of his job. Jim was cleared by I.A. to return to work.

After that, it was weeks of what felt like a non-stop conference with Beverly Sanchez. She flagged all the convictions where Jim had been a witness, then prioritized them by the seriousness of the crimes and the appeals being filed by defense attorneys.

As Jim and Blair walked Beverly through each case, she got a better understanding of how Jim used his senses to give him his edge. She also got a better appreciation of the ephemeral nature of the sensory clues/hints and how difficult it was to find the more substantial evidence needed for a conviction. Even though Veronica Sarris' case was not being appealed, they told Beverly about this first use of Jim's senses. Jim described the slight smell on the thread of a watch cap, which led to smelling dozens of perfumes, to finding the combination that they eventually traced to Sarris.

"How was that even possible to do? How did you think of it?"

Jim pointed to Blair. "It was his doing. I told him what I smelled, but he came up with the idea of going to the perfume shops, and he encouraged me to keep going and not give up. I don't know if we could have convicted her on her perfume choice, but it led to her identity and eventually to that bus. By then she had decided to commit suicide and take the entire busload of people with her. Blair came up with the idea to listen for the bomb's timer, instead of taking the time to look for it. I chucked it out of the bus window just in time."

Beverly turned to Blair. "So, this is what you do with Jim? I thought you just prevented the zone thing."

"Honestly, Beverly, there's no job description for what the sentinel's companion does. Yes, preventing him from zoning was an issue at the beginning. But later I found that Jim would be so focused on just using the senses that sometimes he needed help figuring out how to use them to their best advantage." Blair shrugged. "He does all the work and I just supply the suggestions."

Jim snorted. "Yeah, right. That's all you do," he said, but with a touch of fondness instead of his usual sarcasm. Blair looked at Jim strangely, but Beverly interrupted his train of thought.

Beverly had been looking thoughtfully at Blair. "If Jim is allowed to use his senses openly for his job, do you want to be able to work with him?"

"Yes, of course. I can't imagine not working with Jim. I'm his backup."

"Then you need to stop being so self-effacing. When we finally bring this up before a judge, not only are you going to be the subject matter expert on sentinels, but a partner whose skills are essential for a sentinel to function at his best. Up 'til now, you've had the protection of Captain Banks, who understood your relationship. There's no guarantee Jim will end up working for Simon and there's certainly no reason on paper for you to continue your ride-along. So, you're going to have to show a compelling reason why you need to continue working with Jim. Got it?"

Blair's eyes had been getting wider with every sentence. He straightened in his chair and got a determined look on his face. "Absolutely."

"Good. Why don't we break for the day? See you two tomorrow around ten?"

When Jim thought about everything that had happened in those first weeks, he marveled once again at how Blair somehow managed to complete an impossible number of tasks in the available time. His days were filled with either helping Jim directly or accompanying him to every meeting and testing session. Completing the dissertation and preparing to defend, which should have been his priority, were relegated to the evening

hours. Rather than complain, Blair seemed excited about this new turn in his life and it reminded Jim of that enthusiastic grad student he'd first met four years previously.

Jim recalled that it was also during those hectic days that he'd begun reflecting in earnest about what Blair meant to him and about Blair's place in his life. Jim's chest tightened in gratitude for everything he'd been given since that day Blair had hustled his way into Jim's exam room.

The awarding of Blair's doctorate was, literally, just in time to position him to be the expert witness at the formal court review of the legality of using his senses.

Supreme Court Justice Olivia Thompson looked in her mirror with a critical eye. She was in her mid-fifties and was proud to have kept her body fit and trim. Red hair cut stylishly short complemented a pleasant face, which could morph into a no-nonsense glare when dealing with lawyers and accused alike.

She was prouder of her professional accomplishments. After passing the bar exam, she soon gained a reputation as one of the best attorneys in Tacoma. Having worked as a defense attorney, prosecutor and in private practice gave her a balanced way of looking at law and justice. She'd been a circuit judge for years, and just two years previously had been elected to the Washington State Supreme Court.

During her years, she had heard many cases, some pedestrian and some strange. She'd never been involved in anything like what was currently before her. Thompson had been asked to be part of a three-judge panel. One State Supreme Court Justice each from Idaho and California were joining her. As "host" justice, Thompson headed the panel. She'd read all the preliminary papers and arguments and shook her head.

A police detective with super-senses sounded more like science fiction than fact, yet there was proof in black and white. She'd been out of town during the news about Jim Ellison's abilities and the press frenzy that followed, but she'd heard about it. Now, she and her fellow judges might very well end up making judicial precedence that had wide-reaching consequences because of a unique individual.

The justices had been listening to testimony all morning. They were currently questioning Jim on how he used his senses on the job. Judge Thompson was doing the questioning.

"So, Detective, your opinion is that you use your senses as, for want of a better term, organic forensic tools?"

"Yes. At a crime scene, I can usually find everything that a forensic technician can find. Because my senses are more enhanced than theirs, it's easier for me to find the smaller pieces of evidence, or find evidence more quickly."

"But you can do more than simply notice evidence at the scene?"

"Yes. Sometimes I can do some preliminary analysis. For instance, if I recognize a scent that I'm familiar with, such as blood, or gunpowder or C-4, it helps me decide on my course of action. Of course, I don't have the precision or level of detail that forensic instruments have."

"Well, it sounds like you're giving Forensics a run for their money. Can I ask why you didn't transfer to Forensics, since your abilities seem like such a good fit?"

"First and foremost, I'm a detective. I was one before my senses manifested and I'll be one even if they go away. I use them the way I use all the other tools at my disposal, such as informants, interviews, profiling, physical evidence, and research; to put together what is often a puzzle and make it a clear picture. It's something I love to do and it's something I'm good at. I think I benefit my city best by continuing in my position."

"Fair enough. Now, let's move on to what might be the most problematic use of your senses, at least in a defendant's opinion: your extraordinary hearing. Normally, when police set up surveillance to eavesdrop on a suspect, it's done after a judge has issued a warrant and, even then, there are strict limits on how to use the devices. Isn't your hearing an infringement on another person's right to privacy?"

Jim gave her a crooked smile. "I guess that's what you're going to decide, but my opinion is that I don't think so. If someone speaks loud enough to be overheard, then what has been overheard is fair game. For instance, if someone overhears a murder or a bombing being planned, he can report that to the police and the police are allowed to act on that information, sometimes without a warrant if the danger is imminent. It isn't my fault that I can hear someone from farther away than the average person. It's still using just my ears without any enhancements. But doing extended surveillance, such as what we get warrants for, is not how I use my hearing."

"Since that's what we're here to learn, please explain the differences to us fully and clearly."

"Well, I guess I need to give you a little background on how my senses work day-to-day. Through a lot of training, I've got my senses under control so that most of the time they're in what I would call a near-ordinary state. Like right now, I'm hearing what's going on in this room but nothing outside of it. I can probably hear a little better than anyone else, but not much." A titter of disbelief ran through the gallery, which caused Thompson to rap her gavel for order. Jim continued with a slight smile.

"I know people might find that hard to believe, but it's true. It's something I've got to do for self-preservation. If I didn't have my hearing under control, I'd be constantly bombarded with sounds that would drive me crazy. Have you ever had a dripping bathroom faucet keep you awake at night?" Two of the judges nodded. "Now imagine trying to sleep when there are five dripping faucets in your apartment building and you can hear every single one. Without control, that's what I'm facing. It's the same for all my other senses. And, in a way, it's the same for anyone else. As you walk down the street, for instance, your brain has trained you to ignore a lot of sensory information. Normal traffic noise, for instance, and the number of people walking with you on the street and what they smell like.

"But if a woman passes you who is wearing a particularly strong perfume, or if a car horn blares, or if someone bumps into you, those are things that grab your attention by assaulting your senses. On the other hand, if you look at a traffic signal to make sure it's green, or you're hungry so you scan the street to see what restaurants are open, or you concentrate on someone who's talking softly so you can hear what they're saying, you're making a conscious effort to gather sensory information." Jim stopped to see how the judges were following his examples. At their nods, he continued.

"It's the same with me. If I hear a shout for help, or smell cordite, or see a perpetrator's face, that's grabbing my attention. I then turn up my senses to gather more information that will decide my course of action. On the other side, if we're going to raid a warehouse, I'll consciously focus my senses to, in effect, case the building. I'll listen to try to figure out the number of people inside and their location. Or I'll use smell to

understand what kind of weapons and ammunition are inside. Or zoom my sight on the entrances to see which ones are locked.

"I can even try to listen for specific voices, to identify who's inside, but I can't sustain a listening surveillance for too long because, with my hearing turned up, a loud noise could incapacitate me. So, using my hearing for that type of ongoing surveillance that we associate with bugging a place just isn't feasible."

Judge Thompson consulted with the other two judges. "That will be all for now, Detective. We'll call you back if we need you."

After the lunch break, Dr. Kevin Mulrone, head of the Sensory Analysis and Evaluation Laboratory at the University of Washington, took the stand. Justice Franklin from California was leading the questioning.

"Dr. Mulrone, please explain your process for testing Detective Ellison's senses."

"Detective Ellison came to our laboratory at the University of Washington to have his senses tested over a period of a one week. We have state-of-the-art testing equipment that is certified every year to be sure every device is accurate."

"For the record, when was the latest certification?"

"Four months ago."

"Alright, thank you. Please continue."

"To get an accurate baseline, we tested each of the detective's senses on five separate occasions, and you have before you the average as well as the deviations recorded for each sense."

"Why did you test them so many times?"

"Well, senses can change depending on circumstances. For instance, if you have a cold, your senses of taste and smell are often affected. We wanted to make sure the results were not skewed."

"Understood. Continue."

"We were able to use the standard tests for eyesight, smell and taste, and you have the results in your hands. For hearing and touch, we had to modify the procedures."

"Why was that?"

"Detective Ellison is so sensitive that the normal testing procedures actually caused him significant pain, something we wanted to avoid. Sensory input has two sides: the sense organs themselves and the brain which interprets them. His sense organs are no different than anyone else's; for instance, his nose isn't any bigger." A chuckle ran through the courtroom, but Judge Franklin ignored it and motioned for the witness to continue.

"The brain's interpretation is where Detective Ellison is different. So, when his sense of touch was turned up, so to speak, a pinprick would feel like being stabbed with a knife. We had to devise sensitivity tests that

would be tolerable. Regarding hearing, it's possible for the brain to circumvent the normal protections we would use, such as covering our ears. So, if we didn't set an upper limit on hearing, his eardrums could have been permanently damaged. Dr. Sandburg made suggestions that were helpful in measuring these two senses without causing Detective Ellison pain or damage. You'll find those results are in the form of descriptions of the tests."

"And if you could sum up your findings?"

"In a word, I would say extraordinary. I have found some people who are more sensitive in individual senses, but no one who has all five enhanced to such a degree. As a diagnostician, I'd also like to add that I find his methods of control and coping to be excellent and, frankly, amazing."

"How so?"

"When I interviewed Detective Ellison, he informed me that his senses manifested themselves all at once, but erratically, approximately four years ago. He was seeing and hearing things that, to him, were impossible. He, in fact, thought he might have been drugged and was hallucinating. When he went to have a medical doctor check him out, of course there was nothing physically wrong with him, yet he continued to have problems. The attending physician admitted that he thought it might be PTSD from his time in the Army.

"Imagine, Your Honors, if that happened to you. You could hear conversations when no one was nearby or smell a tiny bit of mold in your house that you were never able to pinpoint, or unable to drink water because the taste of chlorine was overwhelming. How long would you last before you or a psychiatric professional thought you were crazy and had you committed? That was what Detective Ellison was facing. Yet today he functions not merely adequately, but at a high capability." Mulroney sighed. "It makes me wonder whether some people who are currently institutionalized might simply be misdiagnosed with sensory issues we in the medical community just didn't recognize."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Justice Franklin. "You're excused for now. Bailiff, call the next witness, please."

The bailiff called Dr. Blair Sandburg to the stand.

Justice Thompson was again leading the questioning. "Dr. Sandburg, you understand that you are being called on today to provide personal observations and opinions on how Detective Ellison uses his senses, and as a subject matter expert on what we will call the sentinel phenomenon?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"So, let's start with your expertise on sentinels. Can you explain why we should consider you an expert?"

"As far as I know, I'm the only person who has gathered and read all previous source material on sentinels. I started with a book called 'The Sentinels of Paraguay' written by Sir Richard Burton, the explorer. In it, he describes how these watchmen with enhanced senses would help their tribes survive and thrive. During my career in anthropology, I've been on eleven expeditions where I had the opportunity to interact with indigenous tribes. On every one of them, I've questioned tribal members, wanting to learn if they had a sentinel or knew of one."

"And did they?"

"No, or at least no one admitted to it." Blair smiled. "It's understandable, though, if you think about it. Having someone with enhanced senses, even if it isn't all five, would be a huge advantage. They'd have a better chance of finding game or water or other resources. They'd have an early warning system for weather changes or a better chance of knowing their enemy's whereabouts. The tribe gains nothing by admitting it to me, an outsider, and everything to lose if an enemy tribe learns they have that advantage. What I did get were vague references, such as 'there used to be a sentinel in my grandfather's time' or 'I heard such and such tribe has one'. But that was enough to verify that these tribes knew what a sentinel was--in effect, it was not a myth." Blair looked over at Jim and smiled.

"After I completed my masters and started on my PhD, I decided to study enhanced senses in earnest. I advertised to interview people with enhanced senses, and I got hundreds of people, but none who had more than two. In the folder I've given you, you can see that there are examples of people who currently use their sensory advantage in their jobs. Perfume manufacturers, coffee tasters, master chefs, instrument makers; even an Olympic marksman. We've found historical examples, also. During the Vietnam War, for instance, Army long-range reconnaissance units would change their diet to fish and rice because Viet Cong scouts could smell Westerners by their waste." Blair stopped, suddenly aware of his words. "Sorry if I offended, Your Honors. I get a little carried away with my subject."

"No problem, Doctor. Please continue."

"Once I hooked up with Detective Ellison, who fit Burton's description of a sentinel, I narrowed my focus of study to him. There was a lot to do to understand how the senses interacted with each other, how the environment of the city affected them, methods to control and enhance their use. All of that took time but also provided me with a lot of information that I just couldn't find in books. I'm unaware of anyone else who has even remotely done the in-depth research or has the experience in the subject that I've got. Since Detective Ellison's abilities were revealed, no one else has come forward to claim the title, so I guess I'm the only subject matter expert you've got," Blair finished with a smile.

"We have all the objective data you've provided, so why don't we move to the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question?" With that, Judge Thompson turned her no-nonsense look on Blair. "In your expert opinion, Dr. Sandburg, is Detective Ellison using an unfair advantage to gain the arrests and convictions of the citizens of Cascade?"

Blair took a deep breath. "Your Honors, let me preface this by saying that I was brought up to not trust the police. My mother, who raised me single-handedly, was very passionate about supporting her causes. She participated in protests that often ended with the protestors being arrested, so she had no love for authority figures. When I was a teen and accompanied her, I personally witnessed some arrests where excess force was used on peaceful protestors.

"For the last four years, I've also worked quite closely with the Cascade Police Department. I've seen dedicated men and women who work for society's good. Some have given their lives or been permanently damaged to preserve that good. I've also seen instances of cops gone bad; in fact, Detective Ellison was instrumental in arresting some of them. As an anthropologist, I've also observed tribal societies and the way they make and enforce their laws. All this to say that I think I've had balanced input on protestors and their protectorate. I have a healthy appreciation for the Constitution and the rights it affords all its citizens."

Blair looked directly at Judge Thompson, matching her no-nonsense demeanor. "I've also been thinking about this subject a lot recently. My short answer is 'no', and my longer answer is also 'no'. Detective Ellison has, as a result of his genetics, five enhanced senses. As you've seen in other examples, people who are gifted

with a natural advantage use their gifts all the time to their benefit. Coffee tasters and perfume manufacturers use sensory information. Some athletes use faster reflex times or the ability to focus on a ball to greater success than the average, and no one considers them to be cheaters. I know that some people may think that there's a big difference between an athlete and a cop, but they are both doing their jobs. In fact, SWAT snipers are chosen precisely for their superior eyesight and no one questions them.

"In addition, evidence gathered using certain non-electronic enhancements are now allowed in courtrooms all the time. No one objects if a cop uses binoculars as part of surveillance, or night goggles or that sniper's scope. Detective Ellison's eyesight is such that he doesn't need those enhancements. If he had average eyesight, you wouldn't question his using those things, so why is it so different if he can see what you could if you were using binoculars?" Blair stopped his testimony long enough to sip from his water glass.

"Today, no one questions the use of police dogs. They've been used for centuries to track down escaped prisoners or to find lost children. More recently, they have been trained as cadaver dogs. When a dog finds a shallow grave that leads to an arrest and conviction, no court now questions it. Why? Because over time we've proven that the dog's superior sense of smell is measurable and reliable. It required a lot of certification, but eventually it was legally accepted. I believe that Detective Ellison's senses can be certified in the same manner." Blair stopped again, this time to let everything he'd described sink in. He pressed on to the part of his opinion that he knew was more provocative.

"In a way, using Detective Ellison's enhanced senses in law enforcement takes a step away from the technology that defense attorneys object to. Before he joined the police force in Cascade, Detective Ellison was a Captain in the United States Army. Much of the details of his missions are still classified, but I can reveal some information that is pertinent to this hearing. On his last mission, he was the sole survivor of a helicopter crash. He survived in the Peruvian jungle by working with a tribe called the Chopec. During the eighteen months before he was found and rescued, his senses manifested themselves and he became the Chopec's sentinel. Their shaman, Incacha, guided him in how to use his senses to the best advantage of the tribe."

One of the judges leaned over to say something to Judge Thompson, who nodded and spoke. "Dr. Sandburg, you're using a term we don't normally hear in a United States courtroom. Can you explain to the court what a shaman is and how this is significant?"

"Yes, Your Honor. The shaman is a very powerful member of the tribe. He looks out for the physical and spiritual well-being of the members; in effect, he's their healer and priest. Additionally, he's responsible for food gathering, deciding when it's time for the tribe to relocate, and he helps settle disputes.

"Why this is significant is that Incacha recognized Jim's abilities and used them to the tribe's advantage. He could predict weather changes, track game and enemy tribes, sniff out infections. But also think how effective a sentinel would be in tribal law enforcement. What does a polygraph detect? Changes in pulse, breathing rate and perspiration. Imagine how advantageous to the tribe to have a human lie detector? No chance to accuse the wrong person and cause dissent in what is a very small society. This is why tribes so revered their sentinels. This is why, when Incacha and a group of Chopec came to Cascade, they sought out their sentinel to right a wrong done to them."

"You actually met this man?"

"Yes, I had the privilege of talking with him, but not to the extent I would have liked. Unfortunately, he was murdered shortly after we met. One thing I can tell you with certainty, is that Incacha considered a sentinel to be an important part of their society. And I think we should as well."

Blair stopped to drink some more water. "In our search for justice and protection in our society, the tools and methods we use have become more sophisticated. Fingerprints, DNA, profiling, chemical analysis; these are all things that once didn't exist in law enforcement. Each of them made an appearance in court and were eventually accepted. Whether it turns out that Detective Ellison is the only sentinel ever in law enforcement or whether through time we find that he is less unique than we thought, it's time to decide how his gifts will be used in our society."

The justices conferred among themselves for several minutes. Finally, Justice Thompson spoke. "Thank you, Doctor Sandburg. We will recall you if we need any further information."

"Hey, Ellison!" Simon called out. "You zoned or something? The pizza's here."

Suddenly, Jim was back from Memory Lane and in the Vice squad room with the others. "No, just a little wool-gathering," he said ruefully. "Pass me some of those wings."

The euphoria of the bust continued and got even more rowdy as the news spread through the precinct. Jim munched happily on wings and pizza, justified in the fact that Blair, who usually lectured him about healthy eating, had actually ordered them.

Blair, from whom all the best things in Jim's life had come. He looked fondly at his partner, who was working off his adrenaline by socializing with everyone in the room.

More recent memories filled Jim's head.

It took ten days for the judicial panel to deliver its verdict: James Ellison could use his senses in the performance of his job fully and legally. In anticipation of a favorable ruling, Blair and Jim started to lay the groundwork for how Jim's career would change. Simon called a meeting of all the captains during which, once again, Jim did his "stupid pet tricks". Then they brainstormed how to best utilize Jim's advantages to help every department. Things were still too raw, too new for Jim to feel comfortable blowing his own horn, but fortunately Blair could give them concrete examples.

As he watched Blair describe his abilities, saw the respect and pride and awe Blair still held him in, Jim thought back to Naomi's words. For the first time since then, he realized that she was talking about love that went deeper than friendship. And, for all his protests that being willing to throw away his career was a professional responsibility, Blair was doing it out of love, not duty. It was time for Jim to put aside all the hurt and anger of the past months and start to really think about his feelings for Blair.

After the official ruling, Simon, Jim and Blair sat down with the Chief of Police, the Mayor and the City Council. Simon explained how Jim could be of more use assisting other departments rather than staying as a Major Crime Detective. He also explained how much more effective Jim was when Blair worked with him. He provided case closure rates and statistics that showed Dr. Sandburg's significant contributions during the time of his ride-along. As a result, Jim was promoted to full Lieutenant and Blair was given the title of Special Consultant with a salary to match. They were both officially assigned to Cascade PD, but housed in Major

Crime. Jim even kept his desk; Blair actually got a desk of his own. Their friends in Major Crime helped him settle in with a party and his own nameplate: "Dr. Hairboy".

"So, Sandburg, are you going to continue to teach at Rainier?" Simon asked, as they finished off the cake with some fresh coffee. Simon knew that he wasn't the only one interested in Blair's answer.

"Dr. Stoddard offered, and it was flattering to be asked, but no," Blair answered. "There aren't any immediate openings for a tenured professor track at the moment. There's also still a fair amount of disquiet over what Chancellor Edwards did. Better to let it die down," he finished with a crooked grin. "But mostly, I need to focus on this new job. We've only got a basic idea of how it will work. I'd rather have all my time free for our needs here." Blair looked over at Jim. They really hadn't discussed it yet, and he didn't want to speak for both of them. What he saw in Jim's eyes—warmth and gratitude and a glimmer of their old friendship--assured him he'd made the right decision.

"Well, it's a good thing you're not working for me anymore, then," Simon said with a smirk that belied his words. "I don't think I could handle you underfoot full-time."

Blair's smile was incandescent. "Yes, sir, Captain. I totally understand."

It took some time to figure priorities and how to share these two new resources, but men and women weren't made captains by being fools and soon Jim and Blair had their dance cards filled. After a few successful raids and lots of consultations, more arrests were made with less violence than ever before. After his enforced sidelining, Jim was more than ready to work. Despite his concerns, Jim moved into this new position with all the competence he'd brought to every other job. After almost ten years in the PD, he'd earned a lot of respect and friends; once everyone understood Jim's reasons for secrecy, there were no hard feelings.

After each successful mission, they found ways big and small to celebrate. In a way, it wasn't much different than before. But now, Jim was searching for signs that he was reading Blair right—that he didn't just love Jim, but was in love with him. With every meal out, or attending a Jags game or watching an old movie on TV with beer and pizza; with every Saturday working on a home project or quick fishing trip, he saw how well they fit together. How Blair never grew tired of being with Jim, even though they were together more now than they'd ever been.

Slowly, Jim let go of his old fear that everyone who loved him would eventually leave. He started doing more thoughtful things that he hoped would convey his feelings for Blair. "Courtship rituals" he remembered saying to describe something Blair did when he first moved into the loft. Had he been sarcastic, or prophetic?

Four months after the ruling, Jim and Blair were finally able to plan a week off together. Jim packed their fishing gear and they headed to a location that was new to Blair. Jim surprised him with keys to a small A-frame house that bordered a State forest. A great fishing stream was ten minutes' walk from the back door.

"Jim, this place is fantastic! How did you find it?"

"My parents actually owned this when we were little. You know, a summer place to get away from the heat. We stopped coming up here after my mom left. I don't have many memories of this place, but they were all good. Dad eventually sold it. The current owner has been renting it out, but he's looking to sell."

"Wow."

"Anyway, i was thinking that I'm getting a little long in the tooth for tent camping, especially in winter. So, I've been thinking about buying this place. We're both making good money now, and we've got the settlements from Berkshire. Would you like to buy it with me?"

Blair looked at Jim in surprise. "Together? Wouldn't you want this for your own family, you know, for summer vacations?"

Jim looked out the window while he gathered his courage. *In for a penny, Ellison.* "Blair, when you were going to hold that press conference, Naomi called me and she said something." He chuckled. "Well actually she said a lot of things. But one thing she said was that you were doing it because you loved me. Loved me more than any future you were giving up. At first I thought she meant because our friendship was so strong." He snuck a quick look at Blair, who was looking down, his hair hiding his face. "I realized the... enormity of what you were doing had to mean more than that. Had to mean that you were in love with me, even if I was too blind to notice."

Jim moved closer to Blair and continued softly. "And it seemed ridiculous that someone with enhanced senses could not notice all those things you do that express your love. I guess with your way with words, I thought you'd have said something straight out." Jim reached out to run the back of his hand up and down Blair's arm, hearing his heart speed up. "But I have finally used these senses, this *gift* that you showed me they are, to realize your feelings for me.

"Since then, I've had plenty of time in between all the craziness to realize that I love you, too. I'd like to formalize it, but we can't do it legally with a license or rings, so how about with some real estate? And, knowing how you love rituals, I'd like to... baptize this place; make it our honeymoon suite. If that's alright with you, that is." Jim held his breath while he waited for his answer.

It didn't take long. Blair looked up and took the hand that had been stroking his arm and clasped it tightly in both of his. "I want you to know, I would have held that press conference with no regrets, no matter what. You would have been worth any hardship." He looked up with shining eyes. "But this...this works out so much better than that; so much better than I ever dreamed. Yes, to sharing this place, yes to making new memories here, and absolutely yes to that ritual. Here... now... anywhere and everywhere else we can think of." With that, he reached up and kissed Jim with all the passion he could put into it.

When they returned from their "honeymoon", Blair was delighted that they continued to use "ritual" as their code word for sex, which they had regularly and enthusiastically. Their lovemaking was especially meaningful on those nights when they came home from an operation unscathed, which was happening more often. Other recent developments included a lower overall casualty rate for the entire PD and better cooperation between departments.

When he presented a bound copy of his police sub-culture dissertation to Simon, Blair expected it would do little more than catch dust on the captain's bookshelf. However, Simon gave it a thorough read and was impressed anew with Blair's depth of knowledge, observations and conclusions. Understanding that some of

those conclusions wouldn't be easily accepted by his brothers in blue, Simon sat down with a small number of colleagues to strategize how to accomplish some of the changes the thesis outlined.

Before long, citizen-police round tables were created, which fostered greater cooperation between protectors and protectorate. Gradually, citizens got braver at reporting incidents of police abuse, and the abusers were either retrained or removed. They also got braver at reporting crimes in the neighborhood, once they had confidence in police integrity.

It was 2 a.m. by the time they made it to the loft, exhausted but still exhilarated. Too tired for anything more than mutual hand jobs in the shower, they settled in their bed, happy in the afterglow.

"You know, this operation might be the death knell for McMasters in Cascade."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. It's the fifth hit on his operation in two months. Sneaks said the word on the street is he's finding it too expensive to stay here."

"Well, you won't find me crying. All we need to do is put a few more of those bigwigs out of business and Cascade will lose its reputation as the most dangerous city in America."

Jim pulled Blair a little closer. "What's on your agenda for tomorrow. Or, I guess it's later today."

"I've got a meeting at the Academy. The Commandant and I are going to discuss adding some sensitivity training. While I'm down there, I'm getting my firearms re-certification done. What about you?"

"Meeting with Homicide. They might have a serial killer on their hands. We're going to go over the evidence. Stop by after you're through; we might be able to use your eyes."

"Will do." Blair's voice was starting to fade as he finally wound down.

"Babe, I've got something to tell you."

"Mm-hmm."

"What we're doing now, I feel more like a real sentinel. Like I was in Peru."

Blair sat up, all sleepiness gone. "What do you mean?" he asked softly.

"I can't describe it exactly. Just that what I was doing here before with you was great, but doing it this new way seems more... natural, somehow."

Blair was quiet for a minute, trying to digest what Jim was saying. "I think I understand. When you were with the Chopec, everyone knew what you were and your place in the tribe. You worked with Incacha, but you also worked with the warriors. You never had to hide who you were because they accepted you. Now, you work with everyone in the PD and the citizens of the community. You can finally embrace your tribe openly. And," he added softly, "they can finally embrace you."

Jim choked up on hearing Blair put into words what he was feeling. "Yeah," he said huskily. "And to think it all started with a disaster. I guess I'll have to thank Naomi for sending your work to Sid."

"I wouldn't go *that* far," Blair answered as he rolled his eyes, then snuggled once more against Jim. "But I might send her a thank you note for spilling the beans on how I felt about you. To think, we might never have gotten together."

"A thank you note," Jim repeated with a snort. "I think my mother-in-law deserves more than that. I'm thinking a crate of smudge sticks--"

Blair smacked Jim on his stomach. "Jim!"

"And a trip to Bhutan where she can burn them."

"Funny guy. While I'm sure she'd be thrilled with that, I think you could do more for her aura if she believed that you truly forgave her for that snafu."

Jim squeezed Blair in his arms. "Call and invite her to visit. I'll ask her to make tongue. I'm sure that alone will convince her." Jim gave him one more kiss before settling down to sleep.

-The End-

End notes: This was inspired by a conversation I had with Bluewolf. I maintained that once Jim's secret was exposed there really was no way he could deny it, no matter what Blair did. He'd just been too sloppy in using his senses, and people would start remembering instances where he'd used them. She challenged me to write the story, so here it is. Thanks, BW, for the inspiration and the shove.

The title refers to an excerpt from a Robert Frost poem. Fixing TSbyBS by having Blair not hold his press conference is, to me, a road not often traveled in this fandom. I hope it made all the difference for Jim and Blair.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

From "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost