



Lamb to the Slaughter

by Katef

Introduction: Double Trouble:

Jim: The loft, #307, 852 Prospect:

Waking at dawn on a rare Saturday off, Jim groaned aloud as he threw his arm across his eyes in a vain attempt to protect them from the glare leaking through the skylight overhead. In all honesty, the weak daylight was little more than grey murk – in other words, typical of an overcast Cascade late Fall day – but to his suddenly oversensitive eyes, it might as well have been from a spotlight. *Shit. It was going to be like that again, was it?* he thought despairingly. And as if on cue, his sheets turned to sandpaper around and beneath his cringing, naked skin; and the sounds of the early morning traffic beat against his eardrums like a tattoo. It was no good. He was definitely going to see another doctor. The idiot he'd seen only yesterday had told him there was nothing wrong with him, hinting that Jim's complaints were psychosomatic. And nearly earned himself a punch in the face for his cynicism and lack of sympathy.

And if the next so-called 'specialist' failed to find a reason for his sudden onset hypersensitivity, he had no idea how he would manage to cope in the long-term. He just never knew when some taste, smell, or sound would catch him unawares, and he had taken to wearing wraparound dark glasses even indoors to shield his painful and watering eyes. *And let's not mention touch*, he thought ruefully, carefully lifting his arm away from his face so he could study the new welts and hives that had erupted overnight.

Perhaps he was going crazy after all. Maybe it was all in his mind, and all he could look forward to was a straitjacket and rubber room in his future. But even so, he wasn't about to give in without a fight. He loved his job. He knew without any false modesty that he was a damned good detective, and he was determined to keep going as long as he could function adequately. He had no intention of telling anyone, even Simon, about his problems in case he was relieved of duty.

Unless, of course, things continued to worsen and he became a danger to those around him.

Because that was the worst of it. Every so often he would lose time, and would wake up with a start not knowing how long he had been out of it. It hadn't happened anywhere in public yet, or at least, nowhere noticeable – but how long would it be until he froze in a dangerous situation like a fire fight, and caused one of his colleagues or a member of the public to be hurt or killed? He knew he could never live with that on his conscience. He just had to hope and pray that either the next doctor he saw, or someone – *anyone* - else, could come up with a viable explanation. And better still, a cure.

Sighing in self-disgust, he eased himself out of bed, intending to take a shower and grab some breakfast, although he was grimly aware that in his current state it was going to be nothing less than torment. When his sense of touch was this high, the water from the shower felt like individual needles piercing him, and the towels felt as if they were taking his skin off.

And suddenly breakfast didn't appeal much either. Perhaps he would make do with plain oatmeal and bottled water. It had been a couple of days since he last enjoyed a good cup of coffee, and the lack of caffeine didn't do anything to lighten his mood.

So much for his plans for his day off. He had been looking forward to a good workout at the gym, followed by a run in the park. Lunch out at his favourite Wonderburger drive-thru was supposed to be followed by an afternoon kicking back and enjoying the next Jags home match along with Simon and a few beers for company, but in all honesty he didn't know how he was going to bluff his way through the day if his senses refused to calm down. Right now, his life truly sucked, and it was just as well that he lived alone again. He could just imagine what the reaction would have been from his ex-wife if this curse had manifested during their brief marriage. Lt Carolyn Plummer would have driven him to Conover herself before going back to work at the PD's Forensics Department, no doubt primed and ready with her rationale for committing her husband, Detective Jim Ellison, to the local nut house for his own good.

Morosely, Jim chastised himself for his uncharitable fantasising, although the scenario probably wasn't completely inaccurate. Carolyn wasn't known for her empathy, and she was nothing if not practical and uncompromisingly logical. Much better if she never found out about his condition.

Deciding to do without his robe until his sense of touch settled a little, Jim was just about to descend the stairs from his mezzanine bedroom when he caught a whiff of cigar. *What the Hell? It could only be Simon, but what was he doing here so early? And how come I can smell him from so far away when he hasn't even reached the third floor yet? And how did I know that?* Deciding abruptly that it was too much information to analyse right now, Jim grabbed his robe after all, donning it with a pained wince as he ran down the stairs to let his friend and boss into the apartment.

When Jim opened the door before his friend could even knock, it was obvious by Simon's distressed state that the unexpected action barely registered other than eliciting a slight start. The big captain was uncharacteristically dishevelled, looking as if he had just fallen out of bed and thrown on the first clothing to hand. His eyes were puffy and bloodshot, and the beard stubble on his face somehow made him look far older than his years.

Ushering him inside, Jim quickly led him over to the kitchen, ruthlessly wrestling his own discomfort into submission in the face of Simon's suffering. Pushing the unresisting man onto a kitchen chair, he began to fix a fresh pot of coffee even as he spoke.

"Shit, Simon, what's wrong, man? Is it Joan? Daryl?" and he frowned in consternation when the bigger man seemed to crumple in on himself at that last question. Switching on the coffee machine, he sat down opposite his friend and took the large hands in his own, willing the other man to meet his eyes.

"Come on, Simon. Tell me everything. You know I'll do whatever you need me to do."

The warmth and sincerity in Jim's tone elicited the response he was hoping for, and Simon looked up to meet his concerned gaze, his own dark brown eyes tormented and shiny with unshed tears.

"Best if I start from the beginning, Jim," the big man began haltingly. "It's so unbelievable that I can't really take it in yet, so this is as much for my benefit as yours."

When Jim nodded in assent, his expression inviting his friend to continue, Simon stared at their clasped hands for a long moment before speaking.

"When Daryl was young; just a kid at his first school, he met a girl called Natalie Ohuduru. Lovely kid, and we liked her folks. They attended the same church as us, and we got along pretty well, even if we weren't bosom buddies. Anyway, Daryl and Nat were pretty much inseparable through school, and both decided on Rainer U for their degrees. They started together this Fall, although they weren't doing all the same classes. And Daryl said he wanted to stay in a dorm for the time being, while Nat chose to share a house with a couple of other freshmen. They both wanted some independence which they wouldn't get if they were living at home.

"Anyhow, two nights ago, Nat was found raped and murdered in her bed. It was one of her housemates that found her, and all her friends and known associates were called in for questioning. Including Daryl, of course.

"Thing is, according to forensics, there was no specific material evidence at the crime scene. No fibres or semen. Nothing like that. Perp must have been wearing gloves and used a condom. But there were a lot of finger prints in and around the room, and a lot of them were Daryl's. Not surprising, since he visited a lot. But an anonymous tip-off to Homicide claimed that the last person seen leaving the house before Nat was found was Daryl, so he was called in again a few hours ago. And according to the detectives who brought him in, he's refusing to say a word, even in his own defence! So they had no choice but to arrest him on suspicion, and he's being held in lock-up as we speak. The way things look, they'll be charging him with manslaughter at the very least before his 24 hours in custody is up, and he'll probably be arraigned on Monday morning. I have to *do* something!

"Shit, Jim. You know Daryl. Hell, you're always telling me he's like the son you never had! He couldn't have done this! You *know* he couldn't! I need your help, man. I need you to find out why he's being so obstinate! He doesn't even want to speak to me! Please, Jim! I can't be directly involved because I'm too close, but Captain Manners in Homicide is an old friend, and he's prepared to let you work with his men if you're willing. What do you say?"

And what could Jim say? Like Simon, he simply couldn't believe that the kid he'd played with and watched grow from boy to young man could be capable of such a depraved act, so there had to be a good reason for Daryl's reticence. And he determined there and then to do his utmost to find out why.

“Of course I’ll do it, Simon! You don’t need to ask. Look, give me a few to get ready, and I’ll come in with you to the PD if you want. The sooner I can get started on this the better.”

The relief on Simon’s face was obvious as he allowed his shoulders to slump a little from released tension. If anyone could persuade Daryl to talk, it would be Jim; and if anyone could uncover evidence to clear his son’s name it would be his lead detective and best friend.

But there was one other thing he desperately wanted to run by said friend and subordinate, and he didn’t think it would be well received. Having said that, it was also something that could aid the investigation, and anything that could speed up the release of his son had to be considered. So he straightened up in his seat and met Jim’s gaze full-on as he outlined his request.

“There’s something else I’d like you to do for me, Jim, although I dare say you won’t thank me for it. I know you like to work alone, and I understand that. But there’s a new consultant who has recently started helping out at the PD...” and he tailed off a little uncertainly, studying Jim closely to monitor his response.

“Yeah, I heard,” Jim replied reluctantly, unable to quite contain the suspicion creeping into his expression and tone. He knew where this was heading, and didn’t like it. But this was his best friend’s son they were talking about, so the least he could do was to listen. “Go on, Simon. What did you want to ask?”

Nodding in grateful understanding, Simon continued. “His name’s Dr Blair Sandburg, and he’s a professor of Anthropology and Criminal Psychology at Rainier. He’s only young,” he continued, unconsciously falling into a sales-pitch mode as he sought his friend’s approval.

“Apparently he’s some sort of wunderkind Super Genius. Started studying at Rainier at age sixteen in an accelerated programme. Thing is, according to Daryl, he’s a fantastic teacher, and very popular. Daryl’s taking his Anthro 101 class, which is why I made a point of meeting him. And I have to say I was impressed despite myself. I mean, he looks and acts a little flaky, but he knows his stuff, and takes his involvement in any case very seriously.

“And from what I’ve gathered from other departments, he’s had some remarkable results in the short time we’ve been making use of his talents, both as an anthropologist and a profiler.”

Looking thoughtful, Jim conceded, “Yeah, I’ve heard as much also, although I wasn’t really taking much notice at the time. Didn’t he help with identifying and authenticating some stolen artefacts recently? And I believe his profile helped Homicide to nail that hate-crime perp on campus?”

“Yeah, that’s right, Jim.” Simon grinned in relief. “And there have been other instances too.

“So, what do you think? Will you at least speak to him? After all, he knows Daryl, and he knows the U inside out. Frankly, I need all the help I can get, man.”

And what else could Jim do but agree?

“OK, Simon, you win,” he said, a wry grin pulling at the corner of his mouth. “But once we’ve gotten Daryl out of this mess, I hope you don’t harbour any ideas about finding me a partner in the future,” he added with a mock glower.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Jim. But thank you. Thank you so much,” and for the first time since he arrived, Simon managed a genuine, if wan smile. *Hold on, son. Help is on its way. Whether you like it or not!*

Part 1: Denial isn't a river in Egypt:

Three days previously, in one of Rainier's frat houses:

"So, who agrees it's a good idea then?" The tall, blond and very self-assured student surveyed his assembled sycophants, confident that they would support him without question. He was, after all, both rich and handsome, and those were qualities much admired in this particular fraternity. Bjorn Michael 'Micky' Van Hauser was the only offspring of one of Cascade's most prominent businessmen, and was the Godson of the Mayor to boot. He had always enjoyed the best of anything money could buy, secure in the belief that his doting parents' funding meant that he would never have to work in his life. And that meant schoolwork also.

Up until now he had been quite correct in his expectations, but now he was at Rainier, he found that not everything was falling into place as he wished. For instance, although he had no problem with being welcomed into the fraternity with open arms, he hadn't yet found a satisfactory dupe he could pay or intimidate into doing his assignments for him, and it was harder than he had imagined to get the grades he thought he was due. He was particularly aggravated by the attitude of Dr Sandburg, whose classes he had signed up for because he had been told they were both interesting and easy.

Not so. Interesting they might have been if he was of a mind to give serious studying a chance. But although the young professor would always go the extra mile to help out and encourage his students, he had no patience with time-wasters, and treated attempted threats with disdain. And whereas Micky would normally have asked his Dad to pull some strings and get the upstart slapped down, Sandburg also worked at the PD, so was more or less untouchable for the time being, at least. The only answer then was to find and pressure a fellow student into 'helping out'.

And Micky had thought he'd found the perfect individual in Daryl Banks, whose enthusiasm and ability was already earning him Brownie points with his teachers, including Sandburg. But his intended victim refused to be intimidated by Van Hauser, plainly unimpressed by his status, which left Micky both mortally offended and infuriated. No one had ever talked back to him like Daryl had, and Micky was convinced that he was justified in seeking appropriate revenge. Consequently he set about finding out everything he could about the young man in order to exact his vengeance.

And now he was ready, and his plans were about to come to fruition.

This was going to be fun.

"You all agree, then?" he repeated, his sardonic grin widening as his fellow frat brothers sniggered and nodded enthusiastically. *What a bunch of spineless arse-kissers*, he thought smugly before continuing. "So, tomorrow night I'll find and fuck some little ethnic nobody, and bring you back a souvenir, OK? And if she's a good enough lay, I'll tell you where she lives so we can all get some, OK?" And now his fellow conspirators grinned openly as they slapped him on the back, ready and willing to follow in his footsteps wherever he led.

Following night, Natalie Ohuduru's apartment:

Sauntering up to his intended victim's door, Micky Van Hauser's boyishly handsome face twisted in a cruel sneer as he contemplated the next few hours. Although he maintained his super-cool façade, inside he was jittery with a combination of eager anticipation and adrenalin-fuelled nerves. This was going to be so sweet. No one got to thumb their nose at a Van Hauser and get away with it, especially not some goody-goody cop's brat and his equally worthless girlfriend.

He was already congratulating himself for choosing his prey with care. The Ohuduru girl was just as guilty as her best friend Banks, and just as deserving of punishment. While Banks had snubbed Micky's attempts to pick his brains, the bitch had thrown his sexual advances back in his face. It was something he had never experienced before, since most girls of his acquaintance were only too glad to offer themselves up to him. Well, he'd show *her* a thing or two about turning him down. She should have jumped at the chance to please him after he had condescended to approach her. Arrogant bitch! And when he'd finished with her, he'd make certain that her buddy would take the fall. Oh, this was going to be so good....

Reaching Natalie's door, he rapped sharply, then turned to stare off down the hallway so she wouldn't be able to see his face clearly through the spy hole. Within moments he heard her approach, and grinned as he made out what she was saying as she unchained the door. His ruse had worked, and she was about to come face to face with her Nemesis.

Natalie was in her bedroom getting ready for bed when she heard the knock on her door. Gazing at her reflection in the dressing table mirror, she frowned in puzzlement for a moment before her face cleared and lit up with a ready smile as she rose to her feet. She was pretty sure who would be dropping in at this time of night, although she hadn't been expecting him. Or perhaps both of them? Pulling on her robe, she moved towards the door with long-limbed grace, her good-humoured comments falling from her lips as she peered through the spy hole to see the back of a blond head. Automatically assuming it was her housemate, she unchained the door, saying, "Hey, Danny! Back so soon? I thought you and Daryl were making a night of it. You haven't had a lovers' spat, have you?"

Her light-hearted demeanour changed abruptly to one of anger and suspicion as instead of her friend, Van Hauser strolled arrogantly into her apartment, brushing past her as he looked around him, his overt contempt visible in his haughty gaze. He grinned insolently when she got in his face, amused by her antagonism even as he admired her beauty. She really was a stunner, and he was looking forward to both punishing and enjoying her at last. Tall and slender, her close-cropped curly hair set off her incredible bone structure, her café-au-lait skin tone accentuating melting brown eyes which now flashed with fire.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Micky? If you're looking for Daryl, he's not here. And there's no way he's going to do your grunt work either! Any more than I'm interested in becoming another notch on your bedpost! So get out before I call Security!"

Grinning lazily, Micky stared into her furious gaze. "Oh, I know just where your sorry little friend is, Sweet Cheeks. He's at Club Ground Zero with your housemate and his lover, Danny Warren. Probably enjoying whatever sick stuff gays like to call 'love', eh? Shit, girl, why do you bother? You're not a bad-looking bitch, so why don't you chill and show me what you've got? I could make it good for you, babe," and his insolent gaze swept her from her head to her feet, licking his lips in deliberate and salacious lust.

"Fuck off, Van Hauser! You don't know anything about us, or what real friendship is!" Natalie snapped, her disgust colouring both her expression and tone. "Money doesn't buy you everything, you sad shit-head. And the sooner you realise that, the quicker you'll grow up!" So saying, she turned her back on him dismissively, and that was her biggest and last mistake. Snarling in fury, Micky threw himself at her, yanking her around so he could capture her mouth in a savage, proprietary kiss. For a moment she was too stunned to respond, but then she started to struggle, but it was too late. Hands going to her throat, he forced her backwards into her bedroom, pushing her down onto the bed. What

happened next was done in a red-tinged lust so fierce that even Micky wouldn't afterwards be able to recall every detail. Suffice it to say, rape was committed that night, and when he was done, and had rediscovered a modicum of rationality, Micky knew that he had squeezed too long and too hard, and that Natalie was dead.

And although he was shocked at first at what he had done, within minutes he was congratulating himself. There was no need now to threaten her to ensure her silence, and as long as he kept his head, his original plan to set Daryl Banks up was good to go. He had had his revenge against the prissy little bitch, and his scapegoat would get the blame.

Job done. Yeah!

Present:

Daryl's cell, Cascade PD lock-up:

Seated on the narrow bunk fixed to the wall of the small, otherwise unfurnished cell, Daryl wrapped his arms tighter around his torso in an effort to control his body's unrelenting tremors. He knew that his shivering was due more from shock and despair rather than from the cold, but that didn't help him feel any better. A small part of his brain also considered the fact that he had been allotted a single cell, rather than being incarcerated in the PD's general lock-up along with who knew what kind of fellow cell-mates, so he knew that he should be grateful for small mercies. It was probably due to his father's influence anyway, but that actually didn't make him feel any better about himself. How on earth was he ever going to face his parents again? They were both going to be devastated by Nat's death, and the charges laid against him, but how much worse would it be if he told the truth, and the whole truth? He couldn't do it. It was more than his own reputation at stake, and he had no intention of dragging others down with him, especially those he loved.

But at the end of the day, his beloved bosom pal and long-time best friend had been taken from them in the cruellest way, and the only course of action open to him at present was to plead not guilty, and keep his mouth shut thereafter. Surely it would never come down to his being tried for murder? But then again, why not, when he refused to offer an alibi – and refused to allow the person who could authenticate said alibi to come forward.

It was a desperate situation, and he had never felt so alone. Had never before needed someone's strong and loving arms around him so urgently. But it was what it was, and there was no one he could think of in whom he could confide. He would just have to man up and pray that his Dad's fellow cops were as good as he was always claiming they were. It was his only hope. Especially if Uncle Jim could be involved in the investigation. If anyone could solve a case with the minimal information available it would be him. But Daryl still had no intention of telling all.

Just then, his tumbling thoughts were interrupted by the opening of cell door to admit one of the uniformed cops who had brought him in.

Eyeing up the student with a not unsympathetic gaze, he said, "Come on, kid. Your lawyer's here to see you. Get a move on, son."

Rising to his feet, a look of puzzlement on his face, Daryl did as he was bid, and held his hands out for the cuffs to be locked in place.

"I...I don't have a lawyer, sir," he stammered in confusion. "I mean not that I know of."

“Well, kid, I guess you got lucky then, or your old man got one for you. You’ve got Sylvie Montenegro on your side, son, so count your blessings! She’s one of the best, although most cops wouldn’t admit it openly!”

So saying, he led Daryl out of his cell and escorted him to the interview room to meet with the person who just might be able to defend him, even from himself.

As he was ushered into the interview room, Daryl cast a wary eye over the woman who had been appointed to defend him. Smart, attractive and focussed, Sylvie Montenegro couldn’t fail to provide the troubled young man with a much-needed boost of confidence, and he knew instinctively that he could trust her to do her best for him. But it wouldn’t be easy unless she was given something to work with, so the first thing he asked her when they had been introduced to each other was vitally important to him.

“Thank you for coming, Ms Montenegro. If I tell you everything, will it be in confidence? There are things that I really don’t need anyone else to know, for their own sakes.”

“If that’s the way you want it, Daryl, I can certainly assure you that whatever you tell me will be treated with complete confidentiality. As long as you are aware that I shall do my best to advise you appropriately as I see fit.”

“Thank you, Ms Montenegro. So, where should I begin?”

“Wherever you need to, Daryl. Just tell me everything you can and we’ll go from there.”

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Daryl met her quizzical gaze, the sincerity in his expression plain to see.

“I didn’t do it, Ma’am. I didn’t kill my best friend. But I don’t know how to prove it without involving people very dear to me. Can you help me?”

And then he continued to tell her everything he knew and had surmised.

Blair: Same morning:

Glowering at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, Blair Sandburg fought to contain his abundant dark auburn curls in a hair tie. Goddess! It always seemed to be so much more uncooperative when he was in a hurry. *Perhaps it’s time to get it cut*, he thought morosely, although it wasn’t really likely that he’d follow through with the notion. His hair was part of who he was, and had been long for so much of his life that he couldn’t remember what it was like for it to be short. But at 26 year of age, and a tenured professor to boot, perhaps he should think seriously about adopting a more socially acceptable look.

Nah, not yet, he consoled himself. If the cops at the PD had accepted him despite appearances, then he would stay true to himself for a while longer. And anyway, his hair was a minor consideration right now as he had a far more important job to do. He had been surprised to receive a phone call earlier this morning from Captain Banks of the MCU, requesting his assistance, and was horrified to hear of the Captain’s son’s predicament. Although he didn’t know Natalie Ohuduru, as she wasn’t one of his students, he did know Daryl Banks, and simply couldn’t believe that the enthusiastic young man could possibly be involved in murder. If he could be of any help, he owed it to his student to offer it.

As he hurried to finish dressing and be on his way, he considered what small amount of information he had been provided with so far. Apparently the Ohuduru girl had been found in her room in the early hours of Friday morning by one of her housemates, who had been returning late from a night out to see her door ajar. The young man, Daniel Warren, had immediately called the police. The other student who shared the house was away, having arranged to spend a long weekend at home celebrating her parents' Silver Wedding anniversary, so the girl had been alone. As very much a 'people person', Blair couldn't help but empathise with the young victim. How terrible to open the door to your murderer. He wondered if she knew him? It would seem the most logical reason for letting him in – assuming it was a single assailant, that was. But then again, from what little he'd been told about the manner of Natalie's death, it seemed unlikely that another man had been involved. And surely she would have checked first? He knew the student houses in that particular block were generally fitted with spyholes in the doors as a matter of course as Rainier took the safety of its students seriously.

Still, there was no point in speculating further just yet. Blair needed to know what was required of him at the PD first, although he assumed it was for his profiling abilities rather than as an anthropology consultant. But more interesting still was that Simon Banks had told him that he would be partnered with one of Banks' detectives, Jim Ellison.

Now that was something different, and Blair couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement at the thought. Ellison was a legend within the department, having been 'Cop of the Year' for a couple of years running. Although Blair hadn't met the man personally, the detective's reputation preceded him, and he had one of the highest arrest and conviction records in the city. It would be a privilege to work alongside him, although it might well have its draw-backs, as Blair was well aware that Ellison also had a reputation for being a loner, and an occasionally irascible one at that. It was to be hoped that he wouldn't rub the detective up the wrong way as he was really looking forward to meeting him, but he had no illusions about himself. It was a sad fact that, despite his outstanding academic achievements, Blair was painfully lacking in self-esteem. Although he had no time for negative self-analysis when he could avoid it, if he had made the effort to pinpoint the reasons behind his poor opinion of himself, it would undoubtedly centre on his unorthodox childhood.

The only child of a peripatetic hippy single mom, he had travelled the world following in Naomi's footsteps as she sought adventure, enlightenment and love. He knew she loved him as much as she was capable of loving, but he had often felt more of an encumbrance than a beloved companion, especially when she chose to visit places where small children weren't welcome. Then she would leave him with whoever she could persuade to keep him for a while, and the child Blair never really knew whether she would return for him. It was hardly surprising then that he had developed a deep-rooted sense of insecurity, and therefore learned to adapt to and fit in with whatever group of people, or set of circumstances, in which he found himself in order to be as little trouble as possible. Undoubtedly he had gained from experiencing so many different countries and cultures; absorbing customs and languages with enthusiasm; and that was probably the source of his fascination with the subject of anthropology. The flip-side was that he was frequently lonely, and even though he loved her dearly, sometimes he longed for Naomi to be a more regular 'maternal' mom.

He knew it had surprised her when at age sixteen he had asked if he could stay in Cascade to study at Rainier, the very concept of putting down roots being anathema to her innate wanderlust. However, she had eventually agreed, and, once he had been accepted into the study programme with open arms, had 'detached with love' and gone on her way once again, unencumbered and freed from parental responsibility.

It hadn't been easy for the too young, too smart Blair, but he had gritted his teeth and stuck it out, finally finding acceptance and appreciation, and carving out a niche for himself in academia.

By age nineteen, he had his Bachelor's and Master's degrees under his belt, the latter being on the subject of tribal sentinels, with whom he had been fascinated from an early age. He had wanted to pursue the topic into the doctoral programme with a study of sentinels in a modern environment, but was persuaded to change to Criminal Psychology instead. There had been a couple of reasons behind the change in direction. First and foremost was the fact that he had found no trace of a full sentinel however doggedly he searched. He had tracked down many examples of individuals with one or two enhanced senses, like wine tasters or perfumers, but never the real deal with all five senses heightened. And then Naomi had contacted him to tell him that a mutual and much-loved friend had been assaulted and murdered in an apparently motiveless and spontaneous attack. Shocked to the core, he found himself driven to try to understand the mentality behind such actions, convinced that the ability to get inside potential or habitual criminals' minds might possibly help both to bring the guilty to justice, and perhaps even act as a preventative measure. He felt he owed it to his deceased friend to try, so switched his subject accordingly, building on the Psych minor he already had.

And as it turned out, he discovered that he appeared to have a real gift for profiling. He had always been empathic, and he seemed to know instinctively when there was cause for concern, so even at the tender age of twenty six, Dr Sandburg was already making a name for himself in that field.

Not that it would have occurred to him to be in any way smug about his ability. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't anything special, just something to be used for the good of others as required.

With a final critical glance at his reflection, he turned for the door, grabbing his topcoat, car keys and satchel as he let himself out of his apartment, mind already focussed on the task awaiting him.

Cascade PD MCU bullpen:

As Blair drove downtown for his appointment at Cascade Central PD, Jim and Simon were just arriving in the Major Crimes bullpen. It was a very different looking Simon who marched purposefully towards his office, as he and Jim had detoured via his apartment so he could shower and change before heading to the PD, the uncharacteristically scruffy man once more dressed in his habitually smart attire. However, there was no mistaking the strain and stress etched on his haggard features, although the pain in his eyes was offset by steely determination, and his tight-lipped grimace advertised to all and sundry that he was a man on a mission. At his shoulder marched an equally stern and focussed Jim, and all eyes turned to them as they crossed the floor.

Before they reached Simon's office door, they were intercepted by Inspector Megan Connor, the Australian exchange officer who had been working with Major Crimes for several weeks now. She was accompanied by her usual partner, Captain Joel Taggart, who had also recently transferred to the unit from heading up the Bomb Squad after a crisis of confidence had left him unable to maintain his position. As an old friend of Banks', he had no qualms about approaching the other man to offer his support, and Megan, forthright and outspoken individual as she was, was equally insistent.

"Bloody hell, Captain! You look terrible! Look, sir, we've all heard about Daryl. And everyone here wants to help get him out of here. What can we do?"

Reining in his immediate desire to snap irritably at his subordinate's unconscious intrusion into his personal space, Simon took a deep, calming breath before answering; his tone low but deliberate.

"I appreciate your concern, Connor, as I appreciate the goodwill of everyone here. But the sad fact is that Daryl isn't cooperating for reasons known only to him. So Jim has agreed to work with the new consultant, Dr Sandburg, to see if he can shake something loose. I've taken the precaution of hiring Counsellor Sylvie Montenegro to defend him if necessary, so now it's up to Daryl. And those who are willing to believe in him and help him."

Jim and Megan shared a swift and speaking glance at Simon's declaration. Both were only too well acquainted with the up-and-coming Defence Attorney's growing reputation as a dogged and resourceful opponent. The rising star of the court circuit had caused both of them problems at the witness stand, and although they, like many other cops, couldn't help but appreciate her determination and expertise, sometimes it got very old when perps who they knew at gut instinct level were guilty got off on some legal technicality.

Squeezing his old friend's arm comfortingly, his genial face exhibiting nothing but compassion and understanding, Joel added his support.

"Then with all that talent at his disposal, I'm sure Daryl will soon be out of here, Simon. Blair is a very talented profiler in his own right, and if he's going to be working with Jim here, then I'm sure it'll only be a matter of hours before Daryl is released."

"Yeah, Captain!" Megan chipped in again. "And if we need to kick a few arses down in Homicide, just let us know and it'll be done!"

Simon couldn't help but grin at his subordinate's fiery talk, his confidence boosted by her vehemence. He had good people working for him, and he knew that if there was any justice in the world, his son would get through this awful situation intact, at least in a physical sense.

Just then, the doors to the bullpen opened, and a small but energetic whirlwind of a man entered, his alert gaze seeking out his target. Huge blue eyes locking on Simon's impressive form, Blair homed in on the captain, his expression focussed and serious.

As Simon turned to greet the smaller man, Megan's quizzical gaze locked on Jim. "Are you OK, Jimbo?" she asked solicitously. "You look pretty rough there. Good night with the tinnies eh?"

"None of your business, Connor," Jim snapped. "As if you needed to know, I haven't had a beer in a couple of days, OK? Just got a headache is all!" Although he knew he should appreciate her concern, she had always managed to get under his skin ever since her arrival. Yes, he recognised that she was a damned god cop, and one you'd want watching your back, but as far as he was concerned, actually working with her was nothing short of torture, and he knew Simon had figured that out pretty quickly. The captain had quickly tired of their interminable head-butting, and had partnered her with Joel instead; a move that was apparently more than successful.

Then again, Jim knew he was being nothing short of rude, so quickly attempted to moderate his tone.

"Sorry, Megs. It's just that I have a migraine that won't quit, and I need to be on top of my game for Daryl's sake. Don't worry about me."

Looking slightly mollified, Connor nodded understandingly before replying. "Well, if it's any comfort, Jimbo, I think you will find working with Sandy – I mean, Dr Sandburg – really helpful. I've met him before on occasion when he's worked with other departments, and I have to say he's more than just cute to look at. That young man has a brain to reckon with, and he's a teacher to boot. If anyone can help you pin down the real perp, it'll be him."

Jim nodded somewhat distractedly as Simon beckoned him into his office, closing the door behind him as he quickly surveyed the small room.

Indicating the smaller man, Simon introduced them quickly. "Jim, meet Dr Sandburg. Dr Sandburg, this is Detective Jim Ellison."

Smiling warmly, Blair held out his hand to Jim, saying, "Very pleased to meet you, Detective, although I wish it could have been under better circumstances. But please call me Blair. Dr Sandburg sounds so dry and formal!"

Jim couldn't help but return the infectious smile, something about the younger man very appealing to him. Despite his usual reluctance to welcome any attempt to fix him up with a partner, temporary or otherwise, somewhere deep in his subconscious he seemed to recognise instinctively that this might be different. His response was therefore much more cordial than would normally have been expected, and Simon couldn't help but quirk a quizzical eyebrow at his tone.

"Pleased to meet you also, Blair. And call me Jim, OK? Might as well be comfortable with one another from the outset, huh?" His reward was an even warmer smile as the young professor beamed at him, the large blue eyes sparkling now in open appreciation. However, Blair's expression sobered quickly as he glanced over at Simon, knowing that there were more important things to do than indulge in a mutual admiration society meeting. Following his gaze, Jim too refocused on the matter in hand, incidentally noting with relief that his headache had receded to tolerable proportions at last, and that his other senses had apparently levelled out.

"So, Captain Banks, what do I need to know about Daryl?" Blair was asking. "I have to say that I should be most surprised to learn that he was in any way responsible for that young girl's death. I usually have a pretty good instinct where most people are concerned, and Daryl has already made a favourable impression on me. How do you want to progress this?"

Simon regarded them both sombrely before speaking, but the gratitude in his eyes was clear to see.

"Thank you for that, Blair," he began. "As I've already explained to Jim, I'll tell you what I know about Daryl's relationship with Natalie. And then I think the next move should be to check in with Captain Manners in Homicide and see if you can interview Daryl himself. He'll probably have Ms Montenegro with him, but see if you can get anything out of him. Anything at all that can help."

Shortly afterwards, in Captain Manners' office, Homicide division:

Seated across from the Captain's desk, Jim found himself having to physically unclench his fists as he tried to keep control of his temper. He knew Blair was looking askance at him, but he couldn't help but react negatively to the situation so far. As soon as he and Sandburg had reported to Homicide, they had been shown in to Captain Manners' office, only to find that the two detectives investigating Daryl's case were already there. And Jim couldn't stand either of them. In his opinion, neither of them had the capability or personality to be detectives in any division, and he had had occasion to butt heads with them before. Barney Schwartz and Rico Estevez shared identical mind-sets and worked in a similar fashion; going for the most obvious and easiest routes in order to secure a conviction, unconcerned as to whether their suspect was guilty or not. Jim could already tell that they wanted to believe in Daryl's guilt, irrespective of the pitifully small amount of mostly circumstantial evidence already gathered. He could also imagine that the pair would have been rubbing their hands in glee at the prospect of booking Banks' son, as they had little time or respect for the Major Crimes captain or his team. Being able to sock it to the department that consistently outsmarted and outshone them

would have been a sweet deal. It was hardly surprising then that both were scowling at Jim and Blair, their indignation at the pair's intrusion onto their turf blatantly obvious despite their own captain's invitation.

"I still don't see why Ellison should be involved, Captain," Schwartz was whining petulantly. "Just because the perp is Banks' son doesn't entitle him to special treatment. The fact that he won't say anything in his own defence tells me that he's guilty, for sure. So why do we need a profiler to corroborate the obvious? Waste of time, if you ask me!"

"Good job no one's asking you, then," Jim growled. "You can't honestly think you have a case that will stand up in court, do you? Sylvie Montenegro must be laughing her head off at the prospect of getting you two on the witness stand!"

"Enough!" snarled Manners, who was plainly sick and tired of the bickering. "I promised Captain Banks that I'd allow Ellison and Dr Sandburg to work with you two, and that's the way it's going to be. Take them down now to the interrogation room and let them interview the boy. And try not to come to blows, OK?"

With obvious reluctance, Schwartz and Estevez stood and exited the office, rudely declining to wait for Jim and Blair as they stalked aggressively across the bullpen towards the interview rooms.

Taking their leave of Captain Manners, Jim and Blair exchanged a sardonic grin as they followed more slowly, Jim muttering softly, "So have you ever worked with Detectives Dumb and Dumber before, Blair?"

Jim's quiet comment caused his companion to giggle unaffectedly as he replied, "No, Jim. I have worked on two cases with this department over the past few months, but never with them. And I have to admit I'm not sorry!"

Arriving at the interview room, they entered on the heels of the other detectives, who appeared to assume that they would be staying also. But Jim was having none of it.

"Thank you, gentlemen. We'll take it from here," he told them, the authority in his tone clear.

"Now just a minute..." Schwarz blustered. "You can't order us out like that!"

"Oh yes I can," Jim countered, his cold stare and business-like attitude enough to unsettle the aggrieved pair. "Now, if you'll just get Daryl in here, we'll get on with the interview," and turning his back on them dismissively, he winked at Blair, certain that they would do his bidding.

Sure enough, but not without plenty of angry muttering between them, the Homicide detectives exited the room and shortly afterwards the door opened again to admit Sylvie Montenegro and Daryl; the latter cuffed and escorted by a uniformed officer.

Once the new arrivals had taken their seats across from Jim and Blair, both men studied the young student intently but not in an accusatory manner. In their own way they were both trying to convey their support for the troubled youngster, something that was noted with approval by Sylvie even though she would never have commented on it.

However, as soon as Jim asked his first question, both attorney and client exchanged meaningful glances, and Sylvie answered immediately and firmly.

"My client wishes to enter a plea of Not Guilty in respect of the unlawful death of Natalie Ohuduru. Other than that, he has nothing to say. Thank you for your time, Detective Ellison, Dr Sandburg."

Before Jim could respond, Blair cut in quietly, his tone and expression sympathetic as well as perceptive. "Are you sure about that, Daryl? Who are you trying to protect? You have to know that your father is deeply distressed. Why won't you even speak to him?"

Daryl's reaction was immediate and telling, although he still didn't say a word. His face crumpled in despair, and he slumped in his seat, the distress rolling off him in waves as he turned his face away to plead wordlessly with his lawyer.

As Sylvie stood to indicate that the interview was terminated, Jim was suddenly beset with a thundering in his ears, as if several drums were pounding various tattoos within his skull. Gasping in pain, he clutched at his temples, momentarily incapacitated by the agony until he finally became aware of Blair's hand squeezing his forearm as he gazed at Jim in concern.

"Are you OK, man?" he was saying, a worried frown creasing his brow. "Can you hear me, Jim?"

And suddenly the pounding receded enough for Jim to nod slightly as he looked up to meet the large blue eyes. "Yeah, Chief. Sorry about that. Don't know what hit me," he muttered in embarrassment, once again having cause to curse his damned unruly senses. Blushing slightly in shame, he offered Sylvie and Daryl a rueful, self-deprecating grin as he addressed them directly.

"Sorry about that, Daryl, Counsellor. Just a headache that's been plaguing me today. Nothing to worry about. Are you sure you have nothing to say to me, Daryl?" he added encouragingly, disappointed when the student obstinately shook his head.

"OK then, kiddo. But we're not giving up on you. Believe in that, OK?" and both men watched as Daryl was escorted out once again, Sylvie Montenegro hovering protectively at his back.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Blair turned back to Jim. "Are you sure you're all right, Jim? Look, I suggest that we go and get some lunch somewhere quiet. I think we need to discuss how to proceed in the light of Daryl's reticence. And I think you'll benefit from getting out of here for a while. How about it?"

And much as he'd have liked to deny it, Jim realised it was a reasonable suggestion. His headache might have receded, but he was left feeling faintly nauseous, which was probably as much to do with lack of sustenance as with the after-effects of spiking senses.

"Yeah, OK Chief," he murmured reluctantly. "There's a half-decent deli down the block if that suits you. I wouldn't recommend anything from out of the PD vending machines," he added with an attempt at wry humour.

"I think you're right, Jim. Nothing I've seen in them even approaches what I'd call actual nourishment," Blair replied with a laugh. "Let's go," and they rose together to make their way out of the building in the search for real food.

Shortly after, at Mario's Deli and Café Bar:

Seated across from Jim in a quiet corner of Mario's Bar, Blair tucked into his tuna on wheat deli sandwich with gusto. Although he had been a little wary of trying his own beef concoction in case his sense of taste was on the fritz again, Jim took a tentative bite only to find that it tasted delicious, almost melting on his tongue as he savoured the rich flavours. Grateful for the discovery, he fairly wolfed down his sandwich, only then realising how hungry he had been. It was only after he had finished the last morsel that he noticed that his companion was regarding him with interest.

“What’s up, Sandburg?” he queried uneasily. “Have I got mustard on my chin or something?”

“Oh no, Jim. Nothing like that!” Blair was quick to reassure him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable. It’s just that I wanted to ask you something personal, but didn’t know how to broach the subject.” He blushed a little then, his gaze turning shy as Jim frowned at him, plainly disconcerted at the odd explanation.

Irritation now uppermost in his tone, Jim replied somewhat stiffly, “I think you’d better come out with it, Chief. Whatever it is, it’s certainly piqued your curiosity. But don’t expect me to like it,” he added warningly.

Uncertain whether that constituted a genuine go-ahead or not, Blair decided to run with his instinct anyway, and fixed Jim with an intense if apologetic gaze.

“Um, how many of your senses are enhanced, Jim? I would say hearing and taste for sure. But what about the others?” and he held his breath for a long moment, tensed for the outburst he guessed might be coming.

“What the *Hell?*” The explosive response was delivered from between clenched jaws as Jim fought against the desire to throw himself across the table and shake the younger man until his teeth rattled. *How dare he? And how does he know that? Is he some kind of hippy witchdoctor punk?*

Holding out his hands in supplication, Blair met his furious glare unflinchingly, even though his heart was hammering in his chest. Ellison was an imposing figure of a man, and the last thing Blair wanted was to aggravate him to the point of a physical confrontation.

“Whoa, man! There’s no need for aggression, Jim. It’s just that I think I know what’s been going on with you, and I think I can help. Please can you just calm down and let me explain?”

It was touch and go for a moment, but eventually Jim settled back into his seat, although his expression remained angry and suspicious. “This had better be good, *Dr Sandburg*,” he grated, emphasising Blair’s title with no little derision. “Since when were you a medical doctor, huh? So how could you possibly know what’s wrong with me?”

Taking a deep, calming breath, Blair continued to hold Jim’s eyes, his own reflecting nothing but sincerity and understanding.

“I may not be a medical doctor, Jim, but I am a Doctor of Anthropology, and if you’re what I think you are, then there’s nothing wrong with you, man, whatever you’ve been told. For years now I’ve studied gifted individuals called sentinels, and I think that’s what you are. Will you let me explain?”

Still frowning, but fascinated despite his scepticism, Jim nodded sharply. *This had better be good.*

Leaning forward eagerly, Blair launched into his explanation, his voice unconsciously falling into lecture mode. And what he had to tell Jim had the other man almost reeling in shock. If the young man was telling the truth, then it was the first glimpse of hope Jim had had in weeks, and he was desperate to learn more.

Lunch over, they walked back to the PD to collect Jim’s truck in order to visit Natalie Ohuduru’s parents, the discussion continuing with Jim eager to absorb everything his new friend could tell him.

“So, these sentinels, Chief. They were like watchmen, huh?”

“Oh, far more important than that, Jim!” Blair replied enthusiastically. “Think of them as guardians. Hunters and trackers able to scent game from afar. And organic weather and warning systems! Everything they did could be of benefit their tribes, Jim. They might even be vital to their very survival under certain circumstances, so it’s not surprising that they’re held in great esteem.”

“That’s all well and good, Chief, but how come I have these senses? And more to the point, how do I turn them off? Can you tell me that?”

The look on Blair’s face was almost comically horrified as he gaped up at his taller companion. “Good grief, Jim, why would you want to do that? I mean, I’m not sure you can anyway, but can’t you see how much benefit they could be to you in your job? Heck, you could be a walking organic crime lab once you’ve learned to control them.

“Look,” he continued, unconsciously gripping Jim’s forearm as he spoke. “When I told you about doing my Master’s thesis on tribal sentinels, I should also add that I really wanted to do my doctoral diss on modern-day sentinels, and how they integrated in a technologically advanced world. But I couldn’t find one. Only people with one or two enhanced senses. I thought that maybe the phenomenon didn’t manifest in our so-called civilised society because we didn’t need them anymore. But if I’d have met you a few years ago, Jim, you would have been like, Wham! My Holy Grail! The living proof that modern sentinels still exist! The real deal! You’re amazing, man!”

“Huh. More of a freak of nature, I’d say,” Jim muttered rebelliously. “And why would they manifest now anyway?”

Blair’s brow furrowed in thought as he walked on. “You’re certainly not a freak, Jim. You should be proud of your gift. But as far as them manifesting now, have you been isolated recently for any length of time? That’s usually how indigenous sentinels hone their senses, by going off alone into the jungle.”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” Jim replied thoughtfully. “I was on a solo stakeout a few weeks ago and, come to think of it, my problems started after that.”

“Sounds about right, Jim. But I think you’ve probably always had them, just repressed them up until now. But if you’ll let me, I can help you learn to control them. It’s only a matter of practice, man. Like with anything.

“But there’s something else I should mention, Jim. Tribal sentinels always have a partner. A helpmeet, if you like, who can watch their backs while they use their senses. See, if they were to get lost in one sense to the exclusion of everything else, they could zone out, man. Lose themselves so they’d be vulnerable to attack. Has anything like that ever happened to you?”

Jim’s lips thinned as he pondered his reply. “Yeah. Yes, it has, Chief. I’ve lost time on a few occasions, but never yet in dangerous circumstances, I’m glad to say. But it was really worrying me. I had begun to wonder if I should consider leaving the force.”

“That won’t be necessary as long as you have a partner, Jim. Someone who can guide you and keep you grounded. Someone who understands what you need.”

Jim couldn’t help but note the slightly wistful tone that had crept into the smaller man’s voice, and it gave him pause for thought as they reached the underground garage and his truck. Opening the doors he climbed in, waiting until Blair had fastened his seat belt and settled in before continuing.

“Seems to me that you’d be a good candidate for the role, Chief. I mean, you know all about these senses, and come to think of it, they seem to settle down as long as I’m with you. Do you think that there’s a deeper connection than just a convenient partnership?”

Blair blushed then, and Jim realised he could easily pick up the smaller man’s personal scent. And it was addictive. Like a woody, fresh aroma overlaid with hints of the herbal shampoo he had used.

Looking up into Jim’s speculative gaze, Blair swallowed hard. “I don’t know, man. Truly. Although I studied as many actual and historically referenced sentinels as I could, I didn’t pay too much attention to their ‘guides’, if you will. I mean to say, the guy who originally wrote about the phenomenon back in the nineteenth century, Sir Richard Burton – the explorer, not the actor – hadn’t got much to say about them either, and I guess I assumed that it was because they were of lesser importance. But maybe I should look into it further. Because I would be honoured to help you whenever I can.”

Nodding agreeably, Jim turned on the ignition. “Fair enough, Chief. We’ll work on it as we go, OK? But meanwhile we’d better get moving so we can close this case as soon as possible. Let’s find out what Natalie’s parents can tell us about their daughter.”

By the time they pulled up outside the Ohuduru’s neat house in one of Cascade’s nicer suburbs, Jim had been given something else on which to ponder. During the drive, he had concentrated on trying to monitor his companion with his senses, since they seemed to be cooperating well in his presence. He had already catalogued the younger man’s personal scent, and had indulged his sight studying the attractive face, expressive hands and the rich, myriad colours in the shining curls secured in Sandburg’s ponytail. He recalled the soothing touch of those hands when Blair had gripped his arm in the interview room, and suddenly realised that the soothing rhythm he could hear in the background was Blair’s heartbeat. Turning to face Blair as he switched off the ignition, he couldn’t contain his awed expression as he explained what he now knew.

“Chief, I can hear your heartbeat. Now I know what was wrong with me during the interview. The drumming in my head. It was the heartbeats of everyone in the room. There was one which was racing – probably Daryl’s – and one slightly elevated. That was probably Ms Montenegro’s. But while they were overwhelming for a moment, there was another one. One which soothed me and sent the pain away. That was yours, Chief. I think I could recognise it anywhere now.”

As Blair gazed at him in stunned silence, he continued. “See, I realise now what you meant about these senses being an asset to me. At least when I’m assessing a potential suspect, anyway. I mean, if I can hear their heartbeats and smell their scents, I could learn to differentiate between truthfulness, fear and distress. Like an organic lie detector.”

Blair’s answering smile was brilliant as he responded eagerly. “Yes, Jim! That’s exactly right! And I’m certain you’d be better than any device! And think of what you could achieve at a crime scene, man! You’d put the CSU to shame picking up on crucial evidence they’d miss otherwise. I told you that you could be amazing, man!”

Jim’s grin became somewhat rueful, however, as he responded to Blair’s enthusiastic words. “That’s all to the good, Chief, as far as it goes. But I believe that I can only do all that with *your* help. Hard as it is for me to admit, I think I do need a partner after all. And only you will do. So, where do we go from here?”

Blair's face fell as he stared at Jim for a long moment, plainly troubled at this new development. Finally he spoke, although what he had to say wasn't exactly what Jim hoped for.

"I don't know, Jim. It's too much to consider right now, man. I need to process before I can answer you properly. It's a lot to take on board, for sure. A lot of responsibility I'm not sure I'm good enough to bear. But meanwhile, I promise I'll keep helping you during this investigation, and once it's done and dusted, we can rethink, OK?" His eyes pleaded for understanding as he knew it wasn't what Jim needed to hear, but he honestly couldn't see himself committing to a long-term partnership yet as the spectre of his chronic lack of self-confidence raised its ugly head again.

Realising that it was as much as he could expect for now, Jim nodded his reluctant agreement. "OK, Chief. I hear you. So, let's go talk to the parents and see what they know."

A short while later, both men were sitting in the truck again, lost in thought as they pondered what they had just learned. Finally, Jim turned to Blair, a wry expression colouring his chiselled features.

"Well, that certainly explains a lot about Daryl's silence, don't you think, Chief? No wonder he didn't want to talk to Simon. He must be terrified of losing his father's respect. His mother's also. Poor kid!"

Nodding thoughtfully, Blair answered, eyes clouded with sorrow for the young student. "Yeah, Jim. You're right. But we have to follow through despite what he wants. We have to clear him so we can go after the real killer."

When they had introduced themselves to Natalie's devastated parents, they certainly hadn't expected the reaction they got to their questions. Both parents were adamant that they didn't believe Daryl capable of killing their daughter. Because not only did they know and like the young man, but as Natalie's father explained, there was no way he would rape her. He was gay, and as far as they knew, had always been so from the moment he hit puberty. It was the reason why he and Natalie were such great friends. She knew he would never have designs on her, and there was no pressure on them to have anything but a comfortable, platonic relationship. And besides, he already had a steady boyfriend. And that was their next objective. To find and question the person who might be able to provide Daryl with an ironclad alibi.

Grim-faced, Jim started up the truck again. "I think our first stop should be Natalie's building. If he's there, young Danny Warren has some s'plainin' to do."

Part 2: Unravelling the tangled web:

Natalie Ohuduru's building, later that afternoon:

The young man who answered Jim's knock at his apartment door was in a sorry state. His blond good looks were marred by red, puffy eyes which were plainly the after-effects of prolonged tears, and his voice when he invited them in was hoarse and cracked with emotion. Immediately empathising with the student, Blair gently took his arm and guided him over to sit on the battered sofa in the cluttered living room, seating himself slightly sideways beside him so he could study Danny's downcast profile.

Deciding in this instance that Blair was better suited to the task of questioning the hurting young man, Jim stayed back and watched from another chair across the room, prepared to practice using his senses to determine the truthfulness or otherwise of the answers.

As it turned out, however, Darren didn't need any prompting as it was obvious that he was only too relieved to be able to confess everything he knew.

He was clearly greatly distressed by his housemate's death, but even more so by the fact that his lover had been accused of committing murder. He freely admitted that he and Daryl were in a serious relationship, but that he had liked Natalie as a good friend who had supported them both unconditionally.

Then he proceeded to explain what was behind Daryl's attempted self-sacrifice. And although Jim and Blair had guessed some of it, they hadn't realised just how much he had been trying to cover up.

"You see, Dr Sandburg, Daryl loves his parents, and couldn't bear to have them think less of him once they found out he was gay. It isn't that he's ashamed of what we have together. It's just that his folks are quite religious, especially his mother, and he thinks they'll despise him for his sexual preferences. And there's more." Ducking his head as he blushed in embarrassment and shame, he told them the rest.

"I don't expect you to know it, but Chief Warren is my uncle. He has no idea that I'm gay, or that I'm dating Captain Banks' son. And it's because we were both afraid of the possible repercussions if that knowledge got out that I agreed to keep quiet when Daryl asked me to. But when he was arrested, I knew I had to tell someone, whatever he made me promise. See, I can vouch for him when Natalie was being murdered, because he was with me that night. We were at Club Ground Zero until after midnight when I came home and found Nat. It's the truth, I swear it!"

And Jim and Blair had no reason to disbelieve him. They could both understand now why Daryl was so reluctant to speak out, even if they thought his reasoning was flawed. Foolish his decisions might appear, but there was no denying his loyalty to friends and family. And now Jim was pretty certain that he and Blair could get the charges dropped, they had to seek out the real killer.

With that in mind, he took over the questioning, although he kept his manner cool and calm in deference to Danny's fragile state of mind.

"If Daryl is innocent, which appears to be the case, do you have any idea who might have done this, Danny? Natalie's parents couldn't think of anyone who disliked her, let alone enough to kill her. But perhaps there's someone you can think of?"

Looking thoughtful, Danny met his gaze, this time with purpose. "There is someone, Detective, although I have no proof, just speculation, you understand? And again, it could have serious repercussions if there's any truth in it.

"But anyway, Daryl was having trouble with one of his classmates. A rich kid called Micky Van Hauser. He's the only son of Andrei Van Hauser, the business magnate. Do you know of him?"

Nodding thoughtfully, Jim replied. "Yeah, I've heard of him. I believe he's a business acquaintance of my father, William Ellison of Ellison Enterprises. I don't know him personally, though. Or anything about his kid."

"I do," muttered Blair, an uncharacteristically disgusted expression twisting his attractive face. "He signed up for my Anthro 101 class, but dropped out pretty quickly when I wouldn't agree to give him the grades he demanded. Arrogant young man and spiteful too. Seemed to think the world owed him a living. I believe he also boasted that the Mayor was his Godfather, which made him pretty much untouchable as far as he was concerned."

“That’s him, all right,” Danny agreed. “He thought that he could pressure Daryl into doing his assignments for him, but Daryl turned him down flat. And apparently you don’t do that to a Van Hauser. Not and expect him to take it lying down. He’s convinced that his Dad’s money and influence can buy him out of any trouble, and he’s already been responsible for some pretty vile frat pranks. And come to think of it, he came on to Nat also a while ago. She told him where to go in no uncertain terms, so that wouldn’t have gone down well either. But whether that’s enough reason for him to try and take such an awful revenge on them both, I can’t say.”

There wasn’t anything else he could add, so Jim and Blair left him, after promising to do their best to get Daryl released as soon as possible. It was a much calmer and greatly relieved student who closed the door behind them, even though he knew he would still have to face up to his own family’s reactions to his relationship. But with Daryl beside him, he believed anything was possible.

It was a pensive pair who drove back to the PD that afternoon, having agreed that their next step was to both bring Simon up to speed on their discoveries so far, and also to confront Daryl again, this time with a view to getting him released. But both of them knew that in doing so they were going to be stirring up a real hornets’ nest, and the consequences had the potential to destroy a significant amount of love and trust between family members and friends alike.

Pulling into his usual slot in the underground parking lot, Jim once again turned to face his companion. “Here we go again, Chief. Are you ready for this?”

And Blair grinned wryly as he replied. “Not really, man, but there’s no help for it. I guess the sooner we get it over with, the better. Just hope the captain is a lot more forgiving and understanding than I give him credit for. After all, you know him better than I do.”

“I think you might be surprised, Chief. But I could be wrong. In which case, poor Daryl! And like as not he’ll never forgive us for prying, even if it does get him released. Let’s go.”

Entering the MCU bullpen, the pair immediately made for Simon’s office, wanting to get their difficult revelations over with as soon as possible. However, when Jim passed the desk of Brian Rafe, the dapper young detective who normally partnered Henri ‘H’ Brown, he paused briefly, a frown creasing his brow as he cocked his head in an unconscious ‘listening’ pose. But when Blair touched his arm gently, he shook himself and looked down into his partner’s questioning eyes before murmuring, “Not yet, Chief. Tell you later.”

Although Blair frowned in suspicion, his impatience clear to see, he kept silent, trusting that Jim would explain his odd reaction in his own good time. For now they had an awkward conversation to look forward to.

They entered the Captain’s inner sanctum at his invitation, seating themselves where he indicated while he studied them carefully with no little concern. Deciding that there was nothing to be gained by delaying the inevitable, Jim waded straight in, although he did try to moderate his tone of voice and mode of delivery in an attempt to soften the impact of their news.

“We’ve interviewed the victim’s parents, Captain, and have reason to believe that Daryl is innocent of any wrong-doing. But he has – or thinks he has – good reason to keep silent, even if it leads to a possible trial. Please bear with us while I explain everything, sir, even if it comes as a shock.”

Pursing his lips and frowning in consternation as he regarded his detective and friend, Simon nodded his assent, a wave of his hand tacitly inviting Jim to continue.

Jim exchanged a brief but mutually supportive glance with Blair, then carried on with his explanation.

“The thing is, sir, that both Natalie’s parents vehemently deny that Daryl could have had anything to do with their daughter’s death. They told me that Daryl and Natalie were pretty much life-long best friends, but had never had any sort of romantic attachment. You see, they had known almost from the outset that Daryl isn’t interested in girls, Simon, even if he did sometimes date a few just to keep up appearances. Natalie knew that, and knew she was safe with him, which is why they got on so well.

“He has a steady boyfriend, Simon. And we interviewed him too.”

That was as far as he got before Simon exploded, unable to contain his shock and denial any longer.

“Are you mad, Ellison? You, I can understand,” he snapped nastily, glaring repressively at Blair, “but you should know better than to make such wicked accusations, Jim! How can you have the nerve to sit there and tell me such lies?”

However, even in the face of his boss’ fury, Jim didn’t budge. No one could be expected to take such news with equanimity, so the outburst was understandable, if uncalled for.

“I’m sorry, sir, but it’s no more than the truth. Daryl wanted to spare you the knowledge because he doesn’t want to lose your love and respect, or Joan’s either. Particularly because the young man he is dating – Daniel Warren – is Chief Warren’s nephew. He obviously fears for you and the Chief if word gets out about their relationship. He’s only thinking of you, Simon. You, Joan and Danny too. That is his reason for allowing himself to be led to the block like a lamb to the slaughter, without even trying to defend himself. Can’t you see that?”

The bigger man seemed to deflate at Jim’s words, sinking down into his seat before covering his face with his hands. He was silent for so long that Jim and Blair exchanged worried glances, wondering what they should do next.

Eventually, Simon sighed heavily and raised his head, his dark eyes shiny with the tears he refused to shed. Voice deeper than normal from barely-contained anguish, he forced himself to address the pair.

“OK. OK, Jim. Suppose I believe you, or believe that *you* believe that this is true. What are you proposing to do about this information? Are you going to confront Daryl again? Because if you are, I want to listen in. Hear for myself what he has to say.”

“Yes, sir. That’s what we want to do now, because we also have a witness who can provide Daryl with the alibi he needs. His boyfriend, Danny Warren. He claims that they were together out clubbing at the time Natalie was being attacked, and it shouldn’t be too hard to corroborate his story. And Danny also provided us with a lead which could help us catch the real killer, as long as Captain Manners is prepared to let us continue with the investigation. Do we have your blessing to carry on?”

Simon nodded again, heaving another sigh before saying, “Yes, Jim. Carry on. I’ll follow you down to Homicide and ask Manners myself.

“And I apologise for my outburst, especially to you, Dr Sandburg – Blair. What I implied was unforgivable, but I hope that you’ll try to cut me some slack.”

“No problem, Captain,” Blair responded quickly. “I do understand, and have been called far worse, believe me, and for far less reason. Let’s go and get Daryl sprung, want to?”

And a relieved Simon smiled sadly as he stood to usher them out of the office, still friends despite everything.

In Homicide Division’s interview room, shortly afterwards:

Once again Jim and Blair sat in the same interview room, awaiting the arrival of Daryl and his attorney. This time, however, they knew that Simon, Captain Manners, and the newly-returned detectives Schwarz and Estevez were all watching from next door through the two-way mirror. Unsurprisingly, the two Homicide detectives were as sulky as ever regarding Jim and Blair’s continued involvement in their case, especially as they had made little progress on their own. It was clear to all that Manners was less than satisfied with his own men’s performance even though he couldn’t actually come out and say so in public. But Jim was pretty sure the pair would soon get the sharp edge of their captain’s tongue once he got them in private.

For now, however, he had more important things to think about, because he could hear Daryl approaching. Cocking his head, he turned to face the door, aware that Blair was watching him with a small, knowing grin on his face. It would appear that Jim’s hearing was functioning well, as he had picked up on the tell-tale sound of footsteps well before Blair, and Blair knew it. But both of them also knew that this was no time to be revealing their ‘sentinel’ theory to all and sundry, if ever, so the secret glance they exchanged was for them alone for the time being.

Sure enough, minutes later the door opened to reveal Daryl and his guard, plus Sylvie Montenegro, who, it had to be said, looked supremely confident. As soon as they were seated, she addressed them immediately. “I take it you have come to tell us that there’s no new evidence pointing to my client’s involvement in this case and that all charges will be dropped forthwith? Because if that isn’t so, I have to tell you that your case is flimsy in the extreme, and I believe a waste of the court’s time should you intend to pursue it.”

Jim knew that her claims were partly bluff, but she had a point. Not that it would ever be tested in this instance, though she didn’t know it yet. So he simply smiled at her before turning his attention to Daryl, who was watching the exchange warily.

“It’s OK, Daryl. We know everything, and even if I think you have been foolish in the extreme in keeping silent, we understand your reasoning now. And so does your father.”

The expression on Daryl’s face was one of shock and horror at Jim’s words, but quickly changed to anger. “What have you done, Uncle Jim? What have you told Dad? Does he know everything? How could you!”

“Very easily, kiddo, if it meant getting these ridiculous charges dropped. Look, Daryl, I know you meant well, but did you honestly believe you could keep your relationship with Danny Warren secret for ever? And give your Dad some credit, huh? Things might be a bit strained for a while, but he loves you, son. I’m sure of it. Just give him some time, OK?”

Frowning in puzzlement at their cryptic words, Sylvie broke in with no little asperity. “It sounds as if you have something you need to explain to me, Detective Ellison. Care to let me in on the secret so I can advise my client appropriately?”

In reply, Jim met and held Daryl's eyes as he addressed his next question to the young man. "OK with you, kiddo? Are you ready to hear everything that Dr Sandburg and I have learned?"

Sighing wearily, Daryl broke eye contact and stared at the scratched table top in front of him. After a moment he looked up again, his expression now one of sorrow, but also determination. "OK, Uncle Jim. You can tell her everything."

So Jim did.

Part 3: Facing consequences:

After hearing everything Jim had to say, with embellishments from Blair where appropriate, Captain Manners declared that there appeared to be no case to answer and that Daryl should be released immediately. Of course, Danny's alibi for him still had to be corroborated but as it was late at night by that time, both he and Simon agreed that the follow-up could wait until morning. And then Manners also agreed that Jim and Blair could continue with the investigation into finding the real killer since they had made the most progress so far. Which of course didn't go down at all well with his own men, but that was to be expected.

Declaring herself more than satisfied with the decision, Sylvie wished Daryl well, and took her leave, declining to ask for any payment for her time so far, thus earning herself a great deal of grudging respect from the assembled cops.

However, there was no longer any reason to delay the confrontation between father and son, and both Jim and Blair knew that it was going to be hard. But there was nothing more they could do for the time being, so they left the bullpen together, intending to go home to their respective apartments for some well-earned sleep.

As they walked side by side to the elevators, Blair couldn't contain his curiosity any longer, and just had to ask what Jim had been doing when he had passed Rafe's desk earlier. "So, Jim. What did you mean when you said you'd 'tell me later', man? Did your senses pick something up?"

Grinning fondly down into the eager upturned face of his new friend, Jim shook his head ruefully as he replied, "Knew you'd have to ask sooner or later, Chief. But to be honest, I'm not sure what it meant. See, as I passed Rafe, his heartbeat really sped up. You know, like Daryl's did when he was upset. And he looked really uneasy – guilty even – for a second before he turned his attention back to the paperwork on his desk. Something's going on with him, but I don't know what. And I have no reason to question him as far as I know. It's just odd, you know? I mean, ever since he started working in Major Crimes he's been nothing but friendly and helpful. Socially, he tends to keep himself to himself, but he comes out for a beer with us on occasion when we get together after work. And H seems to think he's a good partner, so who knows what's up?"

Frowning in puzzlement, Blair digested Jim's words for a moment before offering his opinion. "That certainly does sound peculiar, Jim. And as I don't know the guy, obviously I can't make any judgement one way or another. But my gut instinct is that he has something to hide. Something he is afraid that you'll uncover. But as to what, I can't guess. What cases are he and H working on at the moment? Do you think it's anything to do with those?"

"Sorry, Chief, I've no idea. Nothing too heavy-duty though, I wouldn't think, or more of us would be involved. So I'm no wiser than you are at this point. Think I'll keep an eye on him though. For his own sake as much as for the department's."

And as Blair nodded his agreement, they left the subject for the time being as the elevator had arrived at their floor.

“So, are you OK for tomorrow, Chief?” Jim asked hopefully as they climbed into the empty car. “I could do with your help tracking down this Van Hauser character. And when we find him, I’ll try out my new ‘human lie detector’ abilities, OK? As long as you’re with me to stop me doing that ‘la-la land’ thing with the – what did you call them? Zone-outs?”

And he was rewarded with a big smile as Blair replied, “Sure thing, Jim. I’d like to see this case through to the end, and I’m happy to work with you. We have to run a few tests after all to see just what your sense range is, and then we can work on methods to help you control them. It’s the least I can do.”

He still hadn’t made the commitment to a lasting partnership that Jim wanted to hear, but the bigger man knew he’d have to be content with what Blair had offered for the time being. But he intended to keep working on the young man until he got his way. He felt deep down that they were meant to be together as Sentinel and Guide, friends and partners, and maybe even lovers. And wasn’t that an interesting notion? Jim wondered briefly if the very idea would send Blair running for the hills, and decided that it was something he’d keep to himself for now. He had to secure the professor as his permanent working partner first and foremost, and the rest could come later.

As Jim and Blair rode the elevator down to the parking garage to retrieve their respective vehicles and make their way home, up in Simon’s office, father and son regarded each other warily from opposite sides of the room. Neither wanted to start the ball rolling where conversation was concerned, and for the first time ever, both felt constrained in regard to the natural hug that they would normally have indulged in. Finally, Simon heaved a great sigh and indicated the chair in front of his desk. “Here, son. Have a seat. We need to talk, and I’d rather do it sitting down, OK?”

Nodding awkwardly, Daryl slid into the chair, and watched a little nervously as his father took the one on the other side of the large desk.

“So, Dad. Are we OK? Do you understand why I did what I did? And does the fact that I’m in love with another man gross you out? Because I have to tell you that, even though I love you and Mom, I can’t be what you want me to be. I just can’t. Natalie knew that, and still loved me as a friend anyway, and I can’t tell you how much I miss her.” His voice broke at this last, and he couldn’t prevent the tear that spilled over and ran down his cheek, even though he impatiently dashed it away.

And that was enough for Simon. “Oh, son! I’m sorry, Daryl. Look, I can’t say I understand yet. I mean, your mother and I had absolutely no idea that you were anything but normal. I mean, heterosexual,” he amended hurriedly as Daryl stiffened in affront.

“We thought that you and Natalie might eventually become an item, you were friends for so long, but now I learn that you have a relationship with Chief Warren’s nephew. I admit that I’m having trouble getting my head around that, but I’ll try. I don’t want to lose you, son, although I don’t know if I can ever really accept your partner. But as I said, I’ll try. It’s the best I can do.”

Daryl nodded sadly. It was probably a better response than he’d expected, but it was disappointing nonetheless. But there was something else he had to know.

“Does Mom know? I mean, about Nat and my arrest? Will you tell her about me and Danny?”

“No, son, she knows nothing yet. She’s working in Seattle right now, and I didn’t want her to worry until she had something to worry about, if you know what I mean. I’ll call her tomorrow morning and tell her about Natalie, but I’ll keep the news about your arrest until she returns. It’s something I want to do face to face. Like telling her about you and your partner....” His voice tailed off as he looked at his son, his eyes begging for understanding.

Daryl nodded sadly again. “It’s OK, Dad. I understand. But right now I need to go see Danny. I know he’ll be worried sick, and he was upset about Nat too.”

And Simon nodded also. “I’ll drop you off if you like, son. If you want, that is.”

“Yeah. Thanks Dad. That’d be good.” And father and son left the office together, not yet in complete accord, but at least having taken the first steps towards reconciliation and acceptance.

Following morning, MCU bullpen:

Seated at his desk in his office, Simon looked out into the bullpen, quietly gratified to see his team working away diligently at their assigned cases, and knowing that each and every one had come in willingly with nary a complaint at being asked to work on a Sunday. Although not all of them would be required to follow up on the Ohuduru murder case, he knew for a fact that they were all, to a man and woman, ready to do whatever he asked of them. The support they had shown both him and Daryl warmed him, and he had cause to be grateful for their respect and friendship.

Just then, the bullpen doors opened to reveal Blair Sandburg, arriving in a swirl of energy as usual, nodding and calling out cheerful greetings to all as he fairly bounced across to Jim Ellison’s desk. Now his team was complete, Simon stood to call them into his office, already having decided who would be doing what task as they attempted to close the case and get justice for the murdered girl.

Within minutes, Jim, Blair, Joel, Megan, H and Rafe were assembled around the conference table, ready for his briefing.

“OK, people. First of all, thank you to those of you who wouldn’t normally be working today. I’m very grateful for your volunteering to come in, both on my own behalf and Daryl’s also. I know you’re all aware that Daryl has been released without charge, but he still needs to be formally cleared. And of course, we need to hunt down the actual murderer. And as to that, I’d like Jim and Blair to bring you all up to speed on their leads and suspicions on who might be the culprit. Over to you, Jim.”

Looking around the table and meeting everyone’s eyes in turn, Jim cleared his throat before commencing. He told them about what he and Blair had learned about the Van Hauser boy, and outlined the reasons why he was under suspicion. It didn’t take a sentinel to know that each and every one of his colleagues was bound and determined to do their part in getting the proof they needed to close the case. All except one, that was, and his reaction seemed to be somewhat ambivalent, at least in Jim and Blair’s eyes. But now was not the time to call him on it, so Jim merely offered Rafe a faintly quizzical glance before handing over to Simon once again to explain their specific assignments.

“Right then, people. This is what I want you to do. Jim and Dr Sandburg – Blair – will be responsible in the first instance for locating Van Hauser, and making first contact. And whether that will lead to an arrest is yet to be seen. He’ll be brought in for routine questioning for sure. Obviously it’ll depend on how convincing his evidence is for innocence, but I have to admit that, although it’s neither professional nor admirable in your captain, I like him as a suspect. And even if he didn’t kill Natalie,

I'm pretty sure there's plenty of dirt to dig up on him. And that's what I'd like you and Joel to follow up on, Megan. See if you can shake a few trees on campus and see what falls out."

Joel and Megan nodded eagerly, and rose to their feet to get on with their allotted task without further ado.

As soon as they had left the office, Simon turned to H and Rafe. "As for you two, I'd like for you to gather some concrete evidence to confirm Daniel Warren's claims as to where he and Daryl spent the evening in question. Go to Club Ground Zero first. There'll probably be someone around even at this time in the morning, cleaning up or doing a stock-take or some-such. It's a popular venue for gays, both couples and singles, and even if you have no luck to begin with, I'm sure you'll find a few eye-witnesses once the club opens its doors again this evening. Maybe even some CCTV footage."

He suddenly realised that there was a decidedly strained atmosphere in the small room, and that Jim was gazing speculatively over at a very uncomfortable-looking Rafe.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Simon snapped, irritated by the distraction as H looked askance at his partner.

"Beats me, sir," H murmured. "You OK, Bri? You look like you're about to hurl. You ill or something?"

The young man's face had taken on a decidedly guilty cast and there was an almost panicked glint in his eyes as he stammered, "Do I have to, sir? I mean, isn't there some other job I can do?"

"What's the matter with you, man? Do you have a problem with going to a gay nightclub? Are you that phobic, Rafe?" Simon was incredulous as he glared at the distressed detective.

And suddenly Rafe deflated like a burst balloon, a flush of shame replacing the pallor on his cheeks.

"N...no, sir," he muttered, his embarrassment clear to all. "It's just that...um...I go there a lot. I...I mean, to meet other men. Men like me. And I didn't want it to get around that I was gay. I mean, we've all heard about the stuff that can happen to gay cops, sir," he continued pleadingly. "Hazing, backup late to arrive, that sort of thing. So I kept quiet. And I was afraid to admit that I was there that night. I saw your son and his boyfriend. I've seen them before on several occasions.

"So I guess I'm one of those eye-witnesses, sir," he finished softly, hanging his head in shame.

Simon was livid. For a moment he didn't know what to say, and then his fury boiled over into words. "I can't believe you, man! Do you mean to tell me that you were so scared for your own reputation that you deliberately withheld evidence that could have cleared my son instantly? Without him even being arrested? And just because you're gay? Did you really think I'd be that intolerant if I found out? Go on. Get out of here. I'll deal with you later when I've cooled down some," and his eyes virtually scorched the young man between the shoulder blades as he tracked the devastated detective's hurried exit.

H coughed into the strained silence that followed the altercation. "Er, should I still go to Club Ground Zero anyway, sir?" he queried a little anxiously, wary of having his head bitten off by his still-fuming boss.

Simon dragged his scattered wits together with some difficulty as he turned his attention back to the matter in hand. "Uh, yes. Yes, H, you do that. I think we probably could do with more than just Rafe's word in this instance."

Nodding in compliance, H hurried quickly from the room, eager to escape the tense atmosphere as he prepared to do as he was bid. He'd think about his partner later, once he was clear of the bullpen and any other possible fallout.

Within the office, Jim, Blair and Simon still sat in various states of stunned shock. Although he didn't actually know Rafe personally, Blair was aware that both Simon and Jim must feel his perceived betrayal very deeply. As a trusted member of their small team, the fact that he had allowed his own fear of discovery to override his duty to his boss must be hurtful indeed.

However, there were more important matters to deal with right now, so he met Simon's troubled gaze as he murmured deferentially, "Shall we get going, Captain? This might be a good time to call in at Van Hauser's frat house. Knowing that type of student as I do, I would guess that most of the occupants will still be in bed, having partied until the gods know what hour on Saturday night. What do you think?"

"Yes. Yes, I agree, Blair," Simon replied somewhat distractedly. "But take care, both of you. You don't need any trouble either from this kid or his pretentious and overbearing parent."

"You got it, Captain," Jim concurred, and with a small smile for his partner, he led Blair out into the bullpen to grab their coats and get on with their mission, both men knowing that they were leaving a very troubled man behind them.

Shortly afterwards, near Rainier University campus:

Jim pulled in across the street from the house where they hoped to find Van Hauser. Climbing out of the truck, he and Blair strode purposefully up to the front door and rang the bell for a long time, knowing that it was unlikely to be answered immediately, since most of the curtains were still drawn, and there was no sound of movement from within.

"Guess you were right on the nail about these guys sleeping in, Chief," Jim muttered to his friend with a sardonic grin. "Probably nursing hangovers too, not that I sympathise at all. I remember only too well what sort of shit some of these frat guys got up to in my college days. I can't say I was a saint, but a lot of the frat pranks were well over the top."

"Tell me about it, Jim!" Blair replied, a sorrowful look momentarily clouding his features. "I was pretty much fair game in my undergrad days, and I still get attitude from these guys when teaching. Not all of them, you understand, but this particular bunch have a rep for being truly obnoxious. Spoiled rich kids who think they can buy anything they want. Including out of trouble."

Jim could well imagine what the young Blair must have suffered, and wished for a moment that he had been there to protect him. Then again, he was honest enough to admit to himself that during his own college days, he had been more interested in maintaining his grades and earning and keeping his place in the football team than looking out for bullied Jewish brainiacs and the like. Not that he'd have joined in, but it was unlikely that he'd have acted in their defence either, and in hindsight he wasn't proud to admit it.

But he could make up for it now, at least where Blair was concerned, as he realised he had never felt so protective about another individual ever before. And it wasn't because he thought that the smaller man was some sort of effeminate wimp who couldn't look after himself. It was just the way Jim felt about him. Even Carolyn didn't inspire his protective urges like Blair did; but then again, he thought wryly, she would probably have punched him out if he'd ever made the effort. She was nothing if not

fiercely independent, and dedicated to her job. *Beats me why we ever thought marriage would work*, Jim thought ruefully before concentrating once again on the job in hand.

Blair laid a hand on his arm, murmuring, "Can you hear anything inside, Jim? It's a good opportunity to practice, don't you think?" and he offered Jim a cheeky grin.

Smirking in response, Jim closed his eyes and concentrated on the warmth of Blair's touch as he sent out his hearing. For a moment, it refused to cooperate, but seconds later he found he could easily make out the sounds of someone shuffling clumsily downstairs, muttering *sotto voce* expletives as he went. He could also make out the heartbeats of at least three others, all in various stages of waking up, and he truly hoped that one of them would be the Van Hauser boy. He was more than ready to end this.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. After the sleepy, crumpled youth who answered the door had been apprised of their identity, he had been only too eager to tell them that Micky Van Hauser had intended to spend the night with some girl; undoubtedly the next gullible dupe in his growing list of conquests. However, once Jim began to question him on Van Hauser's whereabouts on the night of the murder, the boy paled visibly, and retreated into stuttering denial. Which was when Jim decided to pile on the pressure and push him on what he knew about Micky's intentions that night.

By that time, the other three students presently in residence had come downstairs, only to be confronted with the same line of questioning.

And suddenly their loyalty to Van Hauser dissipated rapidly with the threat that they might be charged with being accomplices to murder. With the haste of rats leaving a sinking ship, they nearly fell over themselves to deny any prior knowledge of his intentions, only too willing to place the onus securely on Van Hauser's shoulders while trying to disassociate themselves with the dreadful outcome.

Sickened by their pathetic, cowardly attitude, Jim and Blair were only too happy to take their leave, but only after Jim had put the fear of God into them by hinting that they could still be charged with withholding vital information and thus hindering the course of a murder investigation.

It was while they were returning to the truck that Jim caught a glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye. Swinging around, he saw Micky Van Hauser hurriedly climbing back into the Mercedes he had just been in the process of locking up. The student had been parking up in the dedicated lot near the frat house when he must have seen Jim and Blair exiting the building, and was plainly intent on making himself scarce.

"Quick, Chief! The little rat's getting away!"

Jim threw himself into the truck's cab, turning over the ignition even as Blair pulled the passenger door shut. Burning rubber as he peeled away from the kerb, he set off in pursuit as the Mercedes roared off down the quiet street away from the campus.

Silently thanking whoever was watching over them that it was still relatively quiet at that hour on a Sunday morning, Jim put his foot down as hard as he dared in an attempt to keep up with the luxury car.

"Hold on, Chief," he muttered between gritted teeth. "This could be a rough ride!"

"You don't say!" responded Blair worriedly with no little edge of sarcasm as he clung tenaciously onto the grab handle nearest to him. "Should I call for backup?"

“Yeah. Good thinking, Sandburg. Use my cell,” and he rummaged in his pants pocket for a few seconds before locating the instrument and almost throwing it at his friend. After that, it was a matter of concentrating on staying on the road as they roared in hot pursuit; Jim’s superior driving experience almost negating the advantage of the Mercedes’ extra horsepower as the chase continued.

As soon as Blair had called it in, he concentrated on holding on for dear life as Jim hurled the big truck around like a toy car in hot pursuit. “Where’s he going?” he queried. “Why’s he heading to the business district? I’d’ve thought he’d be running home to Daddy!”

“Don’t know, Chief,” muttered Jim, concentrating hard on keeping the truck upright. “But wherever he’s going, I’m not letting him escape! No way!”

Suddenly, Van Hauser’s destination became clear, although it was still surprising. Turning sharply into a new construction site in one of Cascade’s most prestigious up-and-coming development areas, Van Hauser drove at speed towards a large, partially constructed high-rise office block. The signage on the chain link fencing surrounding the area proclaimed that it was destined to be the new Head Office and Research and Development centre for Van Hauser Pharmaceuticals, and it would appear that Micky intended to try and escape his pursuers by losing himself in the organised chaos of the building site.

Without slowing down, he crashed through the security barrier and screeched to a halt as close to the main building as possible before running into the building itself. Even as Jim followed suit, passing the stunned security guards as he pulled up alongside the battered Mercedes, Micky was making his way to a works elevator which was little more than a cage.

Quickly showing the guards his badge, Jim ordered them to call for assistance before heading to another similar elevator, assuming that Blair was right behind him as he went. “Come on, Chief! We can follow the little creep in this. God knows what he thinks he’s up to, though! There’s nothing up there but open scaffolding and girders on the upper floors!”

Blair followed without complaint, but if Jim did but know it, it was probably the most frightening thing the smaller man had ever done. Because he was actually terrified of heights, and the mere thought of getting into that open-meshed cage was enough to set his heart racing and the sweat of fear broke out under his armpits as he ran. But there was no way he’d leave Jim to deal with this situation on his own, so there was nothing for it. He had to back up the sentinel, so back him up he would.

As Jim shoved his way into the cage, Blair pressed closely against his broad back, silently mouthing his favourite calming mantra as he concentrated his gaze on the thread pattern of Jim’s sweater. Anything but look down as the cage creaked into the air, as he knew that the sight of the ground retreating through the open grating floor beneath his boots would undoubtedly precipitate him into one of the worst panic attacks he had ever experienced. It seemed like an eternity until he felt Jim pull the lever to stop the cage, his cringing mind barely registering the detective’s words as Jim addressed him urgently.

“Come on, Chief. The little bastard’s stopped. But where the hell he thinks he’s going, god knows. There’s nothing here to hide behind!”

Peeking out from behind Jim’s imposing bulk, Blair swallowed hard as he saw Micky picking his way across the partially floored upper level, apparently intending to move out onto the bare girders that reached out across the yawning chasm of at least sixteen floors’ worth of empty space. But when Jim exited the cage and began to make his way towards the fleeing youth, Blair hardened his resolve and stuck close behind him, trying to place his feet exactly where Jim did without actually looking down.

At one point, he closed his eyes as he clutched the hem of Jim's sweater for balance, only to open them again in panic as his world swayed alarmingly beneath his feet.

Jim was concentrating so hard on Micky's progress that he didn't truly register what was going on with his partner. Certainly he was aware of Blair's elevated heartbeats, and the scent of fresh sweat, but he put it down to exertion rather than the pure terror that actually triggered such physical responses.

"Shit, Chief!" he gasped in horror. "I think the stupid little bastard's going to jump!"

Sure enough, as he reached the far end of the narrow girder on which he was perched, Micky turned to face his pursuers, his face twisted in a mixture of fury, fear and bravado.

"Come on then, cop! Come and get me! Let's see what you're really made of, pig!"

Easing out from behind Jim, Blair knew he had to do something. Micky might be a murdering little creep, but Blair didn't want to see him die in such a dramatic and horrifying fashion.

"Hey, Micky, don't be a fool, man! Come on, man, you know me. Listen to me, Micky. You don't want to do this. Think of what it'll do to your parents, man!"

"What would you know about my parents, *Teach?*" Micky sneered. "Like you'd know anything about the way we live! You're just a pathetic little Jewish nobody. If it wasn't for the fact that you suck up to the Police Department, I'd have had you kicked out of Rainier a long time ago!"

Blair had heard far worse in his time, and he wasn't about to let the words of a trapped and frightened boy get to him.

Even as Jim bristled in indignation at the insult to his friend, Blair spoke again, his voice still calm and compelling despite his own fear.

"You're right, man. I have no idea about the type of lifestyle you're used to. But I do know that any parent worth that title would be devastated by their child committing suicide in such a terrible manner. Come on, Micky. Let us take you in, and you'll get a fair trial. What do you say, man?"

Suddenly Micky's face crumpled as the small boy within realised just what a predicament he was in. Dropping down to a crouch, he clung on to the narrow girder, tears beginning to stream down his face.

"I...I don't want to die! I don't! Help me. Please help me!"

And Blair knew there was only one thing to do. "Listen to me, Micky. Crawl towards us, OK? Hands and knees, and don't look down. We'll reach out to you, OK? I promise we won't let you fall. Just crawl over here, slowly and carefully!"

As Micky stared at him, a tiny glint of hope sparking in his wide and terrified eyes, Blair spoke over his shoulder to Jim. "Hold on to my belt, man. I'll lean out as far as I can so Micky doesn't have so far to crawl. Just don't let go, huh?" he added only half-jokingly. In actual fact, his heart was hammering so hard in his chest that he thought he might stroke out at any moment, but he was bound and determined to do this. He couldn't bear to live with the memory of one of his students, even a murdering little punk like Van Hauser, falling to a horrible death when he could do something about it.

"You got it, Chief," Jim reassured him. "I won't let you go," and he gripped Blair's belt with both hands, bracing himself firmly against the pillar behind him as Blair eased himself forward to lean out over the abyss, fixing his eyes on Micky as the boy began to crawl on hands and knees towards him.

It seemed to take forever, but eventually the boy was close enough to reach out to Blair, his hands extended as far as he could. And as their hands met and clasped, Jim pulled back with all his strength, heaving both Blair and Micky back onto the relatively solid ground of partial flooring.

Quickly restraining the now sobbing youth, Jim looked over the floor space to see that not only the security guards, but also a couple of uniformed officers plus Megan and Joel had reached the same level, and had been watching in awe as the rescue was made.

“Come and get him,” he snarled. “You can take him down for booking. Even if he still denies murder, there’re a few other charges I can think of to hold him on while we get proof.”

Nodding their assent, the two uniforms came forward and took charge of the boy, leading him none-too-gently back to the elevator in which they had arrived.

It was then that Jim noticed the deeply concerned expressions on Joel and Megan’s faces as they looked past him to where Blair sat, and immediately his own understanding tardily kicked in.

Turning around, he quickly scanned the smaller man, horrified at what he saw. Blair was half sitting, half squatting with his back pressed against a pillar, his hands reaching behind him to cling with a white-knuckled grip to the edges of the brick and metal construction. He was breathing heavily through parted lips as he tried to fight off the impending panic attack that threatened as the adrenalin burst that had kept him going ebbed rapidly. His bone-white face was shiny with sweat, and his eyes were tightly closed as he shuddered uncontrollably, his heart still pounding as if it wanted to burst from his chest.

Quickly moving to squat in front of his partner, Jim murmured reproachfully, “Oh, Chief! I had no idea! Why didn’t you tell me you were scared of heights?” As he spoke, he reached out and gently grasped the smaller man’s upper arms, tugging carefully to encourage him to loosen his death grip on the pillar and come to Jim’s waiting arms. After a moment, Blair seemed to register what he was doing, and, letting go of his handhold, launched himself into Jim’s embrace, his fingers now clutching the back of Jim’s sweater and his face buried in his partner’s shoulder as he almost sobbed in relief. Cupping the back of Blair’s precious head, Jim allowed one large, warm hand to gently massage the soft skin of Blair’s neck beneath his now ragged ponytail, his only intention now to comfort the shaking bundle in his arms.

After a couple of minutes, he murmured, “You OK to move now, Chief? Want to get down from here? I won’t let you go, babe. Never do that.” When he felt a tiny nod against his chest, he carefully turned them so he could move back to the elevator, never letting go of his friend, whose eyes remained tightly shut as he kept his face pressed into Jim’s shoulder, his body tucked firmly into the larger man’s side.

Blair didn’t even notice when the pair passed Megan and Joel, who stood aside for them to enter the cage first. And he certainly never heard Joel’s hushed but awed words.

“That has to be the bravest thing I think I’ve ever seen. How that young man could do what he did when he was terrified out of his mind, I don’t know. That’s one hell of a partner you have there, Jim.”

And as Jim looked over Blair’s head to acknowledge the older man’s sincere comments, Megan added, “You’re so right, Joel. Sandy’s got balls all right. The biggest bloody *cojones* in the unit, no doubt about it.”

Jim offered them a tight smile and a brief nod of agreement before devoting his full attention once more to his partner’s welfare. He was taking Blair home with him right now. It was the least he could do.

Shortly afterwards, the loft:

Opening the door to #307, Jim ushered his still silent and pale partner inside. Although Blair had eventually opened his eyes once he was safely back in Jim's truck, his gaze had been unfocused and glazed and he had yet to speak a word, so Jim was getting worried. Guiding the smaller man over to the sofa, he gently pushed him down onto the cushions before reaching for the afghan draped over the back. Tucking the warm material around Blair's shaking shoulders, he hurried to the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of Jack Daniels and a glass, into which he poured a generous measure of liquor. Returning to squat before Blair, he took hold of the smaller man's hands and wrapped them around the glass, murmuring, "There you go, Chief. Get a bit of that down you, babe. It'll make you feel better."

Doing as he was bid, Blair raised the glass to his lips, his trembling hands clenched in an effort not to spill the contents. He took a small sip, then another and another until a little colour began to return to his cheeks, and his shivering gradually lessened. Eventually he was able to look Jim in the eye, apparently back from his little trip to fear-induced la-la land. But then his still too pale features were suffused with a bright flush, which had more to do with embarrassment than the effects of the liquor he had drunk. Ducking his head in shame, he muttered an apology so softly and brokenly that even sentinel hearing struggled to hear him.

"I'm so sorry, Jim. I...I didn't mean to wimp out on you. I'm so sorry to embarrass you in front of everyone like that. I don't know what you must have thought. I behaved like a prize wuss."

But Jim wasn't having any of it. Moving up to sit sideways next to the huddled figure, he reached around and raised the smaller man's face to meet his gaze by means of a finger under the chin. Once the mournful blue eyes locked reluctantly with his ice blue ones, he spoke as firmly and compellingly as he could.

"No, Chief. No, you didn't. It's me that should be apologising to you, Blair. I had no idea you were so frightened, and just took your following me for granted. I had no right to do that. Because when all's said and done, you're still a civilian, and I should have made you stay in the truck. But I've already gotten used to having you watching my back, Chief. I've never trusted anyone as deeply and as quickly as I do you. Not that that's any excuse, I know.

"But didn't you hear what Joel and Megan said, babe?" and when Blair shook his head, looking slightly mystified, he smiled softly into the bemused gaze. "They said, Chief, that they had never seen a braver action in their lives before. For someone as genuinely acrophobic as you are to have done what you did in spite of it was awesome, babe." And when Blair attempted to turn away, disbelief uppermost in his expression, Jim seized him by the upper arms and turned him around firmly but gently to face him again.

"Believe it, babe! It's true. And I'm in awe of you too, my guide. And I want you to know that it would be my dearest wish to persuade you to come and stay with me. Stay in my life permanently. However you want, Chief. As best friends, roommates, partners, whatever you decide. And if you could ever consider something even deeper than that, I should be honoured."

Holding Blair's now astounded gaze, he tried to convey his sincerity as best he could. Suddenly the most important thing in his life was to obtain Blair's consent. He wanted nothing more than to keep this young man with him for the rest of his life, however selfish that might be. Blair was his, and he needed the smaller man to realise it for himself.

Blair gazed back at him for long minutes, the expression on his mobile features gradually morphing from outright scepticism through growing hope to shy acceptance. Raising one hand, he reached up and cupped Jim's cheek, his eyes conveying love and a hint of fear. Licking lips suddenly dry with nervousness, he murmured, "Yes, Jim. If you'll have me, I should love to stay with you. I realise now that I belong with you – to you. I was afraid to believe it before because I've never had anyone want me nor need me like you do. I'm not used to being loved that much. Even Naomi didn't want to hang around with me for too long.

"But if you truly want me to stay, I will." Then, ducking his head again he continued nervously, "Um, it's just that I don't know much about anything more physical, if that's what you're suggesting. I...I mean, I have no problem with any sort of love. My mom taught me early on that it was the person, not the package that was important. It's just that I've never really had much experience of male sex, and I don't want to disappoint you."

Grinning fit to burst, Jim raised his soon-to-be lover's face again, his own love plain to see in his warm eyes. "Oh, babe! You couldn't ever disappoint me, Chief. I mean, yes, I have had some experience. Both in the army and from my stint in Vice, but it wasn't anything to do with love. Just the mechanics in order to scratch an itch without any ties.

"But with you, it would be the real deal, babe. I don't think I'll ever want anyone else for as long as I live. It's not just a male/male thing. Not even simply a sentinel and guide thing. It's just you and me, babe. Jim and Blair. Forever."

And he was enchanted to watch the love and happiness bloom on Blair's beautiful face, because yes, he could freely admit that his partner was truly beautiful, both inside and out. And then the younger man was leaning towards him, shyly offering that luscious mouth for a gentle, almost platonic kiss.

Taking the utmost care not to dive in and startle his new lover with his growing desire before they even got started, Jim restrained himself with some difficulty before sitting back to pull the unresisting body against him, taking time to manoeuvre them into a comfortable position for a little explorative making out. No way was he going to ruin this by doing more than Blair was ready for, simply unbelievably grateful that Blair apparently wanted him as much as he wanted his guide.

And Blair didn't disappoint. Shy, to be sure, and inexperienced also, but he gave of himself unselfishly, with wholehearted enthusiasm.

True, they didn't progress further than indulging in plenty of delightful kissing and some heavy petting, but it was enough for a first time. And it was enough to cement the bond between them. From then on, neither man would be alone again, and they both knew and believed it.

Epilogue:

Three months later, MCU bullpen:

Jim sat at his desk glowering ferociously at the large pile of paperwork in his in-tray. It was the part of his job that he hated the most, and he strongly suspected that it spontaneously reproduced overnight. Either that or his colleagues were sneaking their own work in amongst his just to wind him up. And up until recently, such activities would have worked only too well, the Ellison of old responding with the expected curmudgeonly sulking and growling.

Now, however, he was more likely to appreciate his friends' occasionally puerile jokes, knowing that they weren't meant maliciously and were simply a part of what made them into such a cohesive and successful team. And he was well aware that he had Blair to thank for his altered perception.

Staring unseeingly at the file in front of him, he allowed his mind to wander for a while, indulging in a few precious moments of reminiscing and contemplation of the past few months ever since he had had the great good fortune to find his soul-mate, and have said soul-mate commit to him in return.

After their initial connection following the arrest of Micky Van Hauser, their relationship had quickly burgeoned into something very special. Something which neither man had ever expected to enjoy. Even after such a short acquaintance, Jim knew that he needed Blair more than he had ever needed anyone before, and it wasn't just because the younger man helped him with his senses, although undoubtedly that was a significant facet of their early attraction. No, there was far more to them than sentinel and guide. Since Blair had moved into the loft with him, they had discovered a deep and still evolving friendship, and in a remarkably short time the loft had become the home it had never been before the cheerful, bouncing bundle of Blair had invaded his space and brought light and life to his Spartan existence.

And then there was the love-making and bonding. Jim couldn't keep the small, self-satisfied grin off his face as he considered that aspect. Although initially somewhat shy and inexperienced, Blair had put his trust in Jim from the very beginning, and had freely given of himself as their physical relationship progressed. Jim had quickly gotten into the habit of thoroughly mapping his guide, indulging his senses in the beautiful body that was willingly laid out for him to explore to his heart's content. And he was well aware that Blair benefitted enormously from his attention, finally beginning to believe that he was attractive and special after all, and not only to the love-struck sentinel. Hugs and cuddles were now the norm in the privacy of their home, and Blair had quickly learned how to reduce his bigger lover to a pile of sated goo. With growing experience, a lot of intuition, and always with love, he knew just where and how to touch in order to bring his partner to the peak of pleasure.

Not wanting to hurt or upset his young partner unnecessarily, Jim hadn't rushed into the full sexual act, but only last night Blair had declared himself ready, and asked Jim to take him. And it had been transcendental for both men. Jim had prepared his smaller lover with the utmost care, such that when they were finally joined, the initial pain soon gave way to amazing pleasure, and they had climaxed within moments of each other, each knowing with utter certainty that their love bound them forever and revelling in the knowledge.

They weren't 'out' at work yet, either as lovers or as sentinel and guide, as they both agreed that they should wait until the time was right. They wanted to have completed the necessary changes and arrangements to and within their respective lifestyles so that they would be able to present both aspects as a working and successful *fait accompli* to those who needed to know. Having said that, Jim decided that he wouldn't be surprised if some of his colleagues, particularly someone as perceptive as Megan, didn't already have a few suspicions on either count.

As far as his senses were concerned, he was careful not to use them out in the field unless Blair was with him, although he could control them so much better now. Blair had come up with some great suggestions to aid him, such as imagining each sense as being controlled by a radio dial, to be turned up and down at will. He had also suggested piggybacking one sense onto another in order to take even greater advantage of Jim's ability. But although they had practiced so that these techniques were becoming as second nature to Jim, he knew that the very best means of controlling his senses was Blair himself. When they were together, he automatically grounded himself with ease on his

partner's touch and voice, and the now beloved heartbeat soothed him more than he would ever have imagined. And because they both realised they needed to work as a team in order to maximise the benefits of Jim's gift, Blair had proposed to make some significant changes to his career.

At first, Jim had been upset, worried that it was unfair to expect Blair to have to make most of the sacrifices, but his lover had finally managed to convince him that it was something he was more than willing to do. He had sat Jim down and knelt before him, holding Jim's hands and looking earnestly into his lover's troubled eyes as he had made his case.

"Jim, you have to understand that I'm doing this willingly. I *want* to be your permanent partner in all things and in all ways! Don't you see? I finally have everything I ever wanted. A proper home for the first time in my life, a lover who takes care of me even when I mess up, and my very own sentinel to care for. What more could I want? I have to be honest, and admit that I can't see myself as a cop. I don't think I could ever carry. But I really want to try and get taken on at the PD full time as a consultant and profiler. I still love studying and teaching, but the teaching part doesn't hold the same pleasure as it once did. Sure, most of my students are OK, but Micky wasn't unique, sad to say, and there seem to be more assholes like him every year. I can do without that sort of stress, man.

"So, what do you think? Can I run it by Simon and the Chief and see what they say? Because if they agree, I'll happily resign from Rainier and limit my teaching to guest lectures and running a few seminars as required. What do you say, Jim? Please say you agree!"

And what indeed could Jim do but submit to his lover's impassioned plea. He still felt uncomfortably as if he'd had the better side of the bargain, but as Blair seemed to be so very happy with his decision, who was Jim to burst his bubble?

And so it had turned out. Inordinately grateful for the tactful and sympathetic way Jim and Blair had handled Daryl's arrest and consequent release, both Simon and Chief Warren were more than happy to grasp the opportunity to benefit from more of Blair's time and expertise. Simon in particular was only too pleased that his lead detective and best friend had finally agreed to have a permanent partner in Blair, happily anticipating even better arrest and conviction rates in his department's future.

As for the Mayor, he was hardly in a position to veto the appointment in view of the revelation of his godson's unforgivable behaviour. Although having said that, Micky Van Hauser had managed to escape prosecution after all as his father had arranged to have him committed indefinitely to an expensive and private secure asylum on the grounds of being mentally too unstable to stand trial. It wasn't a satisfactory result for anyone, least of all Natalie's grieving parents, but it was what it was, and at least the boy wasn't likely to be released for many years, if ever.

Just then, Jim was distracted by the arrival of H and Rafe in the bullpen. Rafe was still somewhat subdued and bashful, but after a short period of suspension without pay – for withholding evidence, and not because of the gay issue – he was gradually regaining the trust of his friends and colleagues in Major Crimes. He had been taken to task by Simon for not trusting his friends to back him up, and had been forcefully warned never to betray that trust ever again if he wanted to remain in the unit. But having had to face up to his own son's unexpected homosexuality, Simon knew he could hardly criticise his detective on those grounds without being a hypocrite, so he had been more lenient than might otherwise have been expected under the circumstances.

And once Rafe had returned to work, he had been surprised and incredibly grateful for the welcome he had received. H still regarded him as a good partner, and after some initial awkwardness, the other

detectives accepted him back if not exactly with open arms, then at least with a greater measure of tolerance and understanding than he ever would have expected.

Acknowledging the pair with an agreeable nod as they passed his desk, Jim knew that both he and Blair in particular had also had a hand in making Rafe's return to work easier than it might otherwise have been. They had refused to be drawn into any discussion likely to refer to the younger detective's alternative life choices in derogatory terms, and Blair had made it very clear to all and sundry that intolerance and bigotry had no place in a force that claimed to serve and protect. He had been vociferously backed up by Joel, Megan and H in particular, such that any potential detractors realised very quickly that they had better keep their mouths shut or face the consequences.

As far as Simon was concerned, Jim knew that having to come to terms with Daryl and Danny's relationship had forced him to reconsider and readjust his beliefs and behaviour as both captain and father. With Jim and Blair's support, and that of the majority of his people, he had begun to accept the situation with considerably less awkwardness than even he would have given himself credit for, such that he had been persuaded to meet the young couple for dinner on neutral ground at the loft. And had found to his great surprise that he had liked Danny very much, gratified to see how well he treated Daryl, and how Daryl reciprocated in kind. It was a great step towards real reconciliation between father and son, and Jim and Blair were happy to witness it.

Unfortunately, however, Joan had taken the news of her son's choice of partner very hard, and that, coupled with the death of the girl for whom she had harboured fond hopes of eventually becoming her daughter-in-law, led her to resolutely refuse to accept the situation. Jim knew that the estrangement between mother and son hurt Daryl very much, and Simon also, but there was nothing to be done until Joan was prepared to reconsider her opinion. And when that would be, no one could guess.

Suddenly, sensitive ears picked up the sounds Jim had been waiting for. His partner had entered the building, and Jim's grin widened in anticipation. As he looked towards the bullpen doors, he couldn't fail to see Megan nudge Joel in the ribs as she chuckled gleefully, "Hey, Joel! Guess Sandy's on his way up. Just look at Jimbo light up like a Christmas tree!"

Sending her a wry glance, he responded with, "Yeah, yeah, whatever, Connor!" only for her to break into peals of laughter.

"Aw, Jimbo! Don't be like that! You make such a cute couple!" she chortled, exchanging a conspiratorial glance with an equally amused Joel.

"And what sort of couple would that be, then?" Jim couldn't help but enquire, his own laughter threatening to break out despite himself. "A couple of handsome devils? A couple of talented sleuths?"

"Nah, just a couple," Megan laughed, but with a knowing wink.

Yep, she definitely has us pegged, Jim thought ruefully. Wonder if everyone else has too? Blair was right. We really need to tell Simon before he finds out from someone else. Don't want to upset him after all he's been through. And we need to keep him sweet for when we tell him about the sentinel stuff too.

His musings were interrupted by the opening of the bullpen doors, and his vision was filled by the glorious sight of his partner, who fairly bounced into the room, eyes glowing with love and happiness

as they lighted on Jim. He hurried over to join Jim at his desk, waving and greeting everyone he met on the way, to finally come to a halt beside his bigger lover. Jim was hard put to refrain from reaching out for his guide in order to plant a welcoming kiss on the lush lips, but he managed to restrain himself, the knowing glint in Blair's eyes telling him that the younger man had harboured a similar thought. Restricting themselves instead to the tacit promise of future delights in the speaking gaze they shared, Blair greeted his lover, his rich, honeyed tones soothing Jim as no other voice could.

"Hey, Jim, man! Sorry I'm a bit late. I got held up at Rainier when I was packing up the last of my stuff. Eli came over to invite me to a party the department wants to throw for my leaving do. You too, of course, man! What do you think? Will you come with me? It should be fun."

There was no way Jim would refuse, even if parties weren't really his thing. It was no more than Blair was due after giving so many years of dedicated service to the U, particularly if Dr Eli Stoddard had anything to do with it. Eli had been Blair's friend and mentor for nearly all of that time, and Jim knew that no longer being able to work alongside him was the hardest part of Blair's decision to leave. Not that they would lose touch. Jim was sure that they would remain friends, especially as Blair wasn't severing his ties completely. Eli had already broached the possibility of Blair lecturing on an ad hoc basis, particularly on the subjects of criminology and psychological profiling for post graduate students.

"Sure, Chief. Why not? Just let me know when and where, and I'll be there.

"But since you're here now, I don't suppose you'd like to give me a hand with all this stuff would you?" he almost whined, indicating the pile of paperwork with a sweep of his hand. "You're so much better at it than I am, and the sooner we finish, the sooner we can get out of here," he added, with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

Blair couldn't help but giggle at his lover's playfulness, but there was something else they had to do first, and it was better to get it over with.

"Sure I will, man, but didn't you want to go and see Simon? You know, tell him about a couple of things?" and he gazed expectantly up into Jim's now somewhat pained and rueful face.

"Um, yeah. Guess you're right, Chief," he agreed, if rather reluctantly. "No time like the present. Let's get it over with, shall we?"

And with Blair's encouraging nod of consent, they made their way side by side over to Simon's office, entering at his gruff invitation.

After their friend and captain had ushered them in and got them seated, Jim leaned forward, glancing over at his partner first in order to take courage from the love and support he found in those beautiful blues before meeting his captain's inquisitive gaze.

"Well, Simon...um...Captain, it's like this. There are one or two things we feel you should know about us. Things we would like to share. Things which we feel would definitely be of benefit to the department. Have you ever by any chance heard of Sentinels and their Guides, sir...?"

THE END