



GUIDE ISSUES

By Fran

Chapter 1

Major Crimes was bustling with activity when Blair Sandburg walked into the bullpen, glancing around curiously before going to the desk and asking for Captain Simon Banks.

The secretary, a pretty blonde, glanced over the young man speculatively, her smile friendly. "Do you have an appointment?" she asked politely. She knew Simon had an appointment with a doctor from Rainier but the man before her, with the young friendly face, shoulder length curly hair and sapphire blue eyes, didn't seem old enough to be a doctor.

"Yes, he's expecting me. I am Doctor Blair Sandburg. I'm here from Rainier's Sentinel Guide Foundation."

The secretary nodded, a little surprised at the youthful appearance, and picked up the phone to confirm the doctor's arrival before rising and opening the door to the captain's office.

"Doctor Sandburg," Simon Banks rose to meet his guest, shaking hands with the doctor before offering him a seat and leaning against his desk to look down at the Foundation representative. "I realize the Foundation requires safety inspections for sentinels--"

"And guides," Blair cut in.

"And guides." Simon Banks inclined his head before continuing, "but we've never had a sentinel guide overseer before."

Blair had to work not to roll his eyes at the statement. He had already heard this was the kind of response the SGF was getting about their new policy. He was not here as an overseer but more as a spokesman and representative for sentinels and guides. "Captain, in the last thirty years, there has been a 70% drop in the number of sentinels and guides in the work force. We recognize some of the factors causing the loss; we live in a global community, so guides and sentinels don't meet and interact the way they did in a tribal community, and sentinels' and guides' abilities may remain latent because they are not meeting. There is, certainly, less room for isolation, a factor common in bringing out sentinel abilities. The urban environment is detrimental to sentinels so they may be living in more rural areas where they are not identified. In addition, there are now a lot of tools that can do what sentinels did, so the need to have sentinels and guides isn't as imperative. There may be other factors as well. Accordingly, the SGF wants to protect a valuable resource. Therefore, we are placing representatives in public divisions where sentinels and guides work, to help them."

"And this is being paid for by..." Simon asked, thinking over his budget lines.

"The SGF has a grant from the government," Blair finished. "It will not affect your budget. I will be here two and half days a week. Though I can be reached at Rainier's Foundation Office if you need me on a day I'm not scheduled here."

Simon considered this for a moment. He didn't like the idea of anyone overseeing anything in the Major Crimes bullpen, but all divisions had been asked to cooperate by the Commissioner.

"Look, Doctor," Simon answered with little patience. "Major Crimes has no sentinel guide pairs, so I don't know why you are here. Surely you would be better off in a division where there are pairings. I believe the Crime Scene Unit and SWAT both have pairs."

"Captain." Blair looked up at the man towering over him, undaunted by either the man's height or bearing. "Rainier's Sentinel Guide Foundation keeps very complete records of sentinels and guides. Yes, the other two divisions have sentinel guide pairs, and I'll check in with them whenever I am here and help them should they need support, but their senses did not rank anywhere near as high as James Ellison's and he is working in Major Crimes."

"He is not a paired sentinel," Simon countered.

Blair had introduced himself as a doctor but he was also a guide, and as a guide, he was empathic and could sense surface emotions in others. As Simon answered, Blair could feel a wave of concern coming from the captain. "All the more reason for me to be here to help him find a guide," Blair answered reasonably, trying to calm the fears he could sense in the captain.

If anything, Blair felt Simon's concern increase as he answered, "He doesn't want a guide or to use his senses. He keeps them locked down."

Blair blinked as the last statement went through his mind, *twice*.

"He doesn't use his senses," Blair repeated in shock. "He's a sentinel and a detective and he doesn't use his senses. He is seriously undermining his abilities."

"Jim does fine without them. He's already received the Officer of the Year award, without using his senses."

"Captain, think of what he could do, if he used his senses. He'd be a walking crime lab. All he needs is a guide and some training--"

"I did mention Jim does not want a guide," Simon answered, sounding impatient and Blair could feel anger rising in the captain. "And I don't want you harassing him."

"But that's crazy!" Blair answered, shocked. "He must go through life feeling like everything is muffled and constant repressing must be exhausting. It has to be causing him headaches, at the very least."

"Look, Doctor, I may be required to give you space here, but I will not have you harassing my officers, especially Jim. He has chosen not to be a sentinel. And I believe that is his right."

"Of course it is, but--"

"But nothing," Simon growled. "He has made a choice and it is up to us to respect it."

Blair looked up at Simon Banks, not understanding the anger or the attitude. There had to be some weird history here that he was unfamiliar with. Deciding he would do some research, he nodded. "It is his choice," he said quietly, before adding, "but man, what a waste."

Simon indicated the door. "I'll show you where we've put your desk and introduce you to some of the detectives in Major Crimes." Simon straightened and Blair followed him out into the bullpen. In a far corner, away from the main bustle, there was an empty desk. Simon led Blair to it. "I've ordered a phone; it should be installed later today. Anything else you might need, I can requisition."

Blair nodded his understanding and dropped his backpack down on the desk before turning to survey the room, specifically looking for Jim Ellison's desk.

"Rafe, Brown, Connor," Simon called and three detectives came over. "This is Doctor Blair Sandburg. He's from the Sentinel Guide Foundation. He'll be working here as their liaison." He glanced at Blair, "Detectives Rafe and Brown are partners, and Inspector Conner is on exchange from Australia."

The three detectives nodded, Detectives Rafe and Brown glancing over him with interest, while Connor smiled. "Welcome, mate." She stuck out her hand.

"Thanks." Blair shook the offered hand. "I'm looking forward to working with all of you."

Rafe and Brown nodded and turned back to their desks. Connor hesitated a moment, and Blair was sure she wanted to ask him some questions, but then turned away as well. "Where is Detective Ellison?" Blair turned back to Simon.

"In court. I'm afraid you won't get to meet him just yet."

"Will he be back today?"

"Hard to say," Simon shrugged. "It depends on when he is called to testify."

"Right." Blair looked at Simon thoughtfully. He doubted Simon was being totally forthright with information about Detective Ellison's availability. Blair suspected Simon was planning on Ellison avoiding the SGF's liaison, but as he was going to work here two and half days a week, there would be no way they would be able to keep him from meeting Detective Ellison.

"Okay, I'll make up a list of things I'll need and give it to your secretary and then I'll meet Detective Ellison another day." With that, Blair took a seat and, with great deliberation, pulled out a legal pad and paper.

Simon watched him for a moment, scowling, and then turned and walked back into his office.

Chapter 2

Before leaving the PD, Blair dropped off a list of things he would need requisitioned and went down to SWAT and met the sentinel guide pair there. When he heard the CSU pair were in the field, he made his way back to the SGF. As a SGF instructor, Blair had access to the SGF databases that listed testing levels for sentinels and guides. After entering his code and password he typed "James Ellison" into the sentinel guide database. The sentinel's name came up immediately, along with his very high sentinel scores, but there was some kind of sealed notation referencing a guide database. Blair tried to access it, only to find the files had been deleted.

Puzzled, he went in search of his mentor, Dr. Stoddard. Dr. Stoddard was not part of the SGF. He was the Chair of Anthropology at Rainier University, but as an anthropologist and a scientist he knew about sentinels and guides and their traditional roles in the tribe.

"Blair," the older man greeted. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you. I just came from the PD."

"Ah, yes, I heard you were the SGF's rep for the PD. I take it you did not receive a good reception?"

"Yeah, you could say that." Blair dropped into a seat. "I don't know what they think we are there to do."

"They think the SGF is going to interfere with the workings of their departments, and make demands on their people," Stoddard answered, as he got up and poured two cups of coffee, handing one to Blair. "To some extent they may be correct."

"What do you mean? The only way we would interfere is if something were detrimental to the sentinel or guide." Blair came to the defense of the foundation.

Stoddard nodded and turned a sharp glance on Blair. "Have you read any of Dr. Stone's recent proposals?"

"Stone may be the chair of the SGF but he is a crackpot," Blair answered, dismissively.

"Yes, a crackpot who believes sentinels, and by extension their guides, should be forced to live in sterile, safe environments and guides should have certain legal rights over their sentinels once bonded. Though no one has moved to curtail either group's rights, the fact that we have become watchdogs bodes badly."

"You are over-reacting to what's going on," Blair answered, but even as he responded, something in him questioned his belief. If Stoddard was worried, there was something to consider.

"Am I? Did you know that some of the foundation representatives sent out to the fire department are arguing that sentinels should not be allowed to work there? The representatives are saying the work is dangerous, what with chemicals in the air, and that it is not only unsafe for the sentinels but unfair for the guides who must follow them into these situations to keep the sentinels safe."

"There's never been a sentinel or guide who died as a result of firefighting," Blair answered and Stoddard nodded.

"That is true and has been pointed out by the fire department. However, you must understand these representatives went out with an agenda, Blair. I think the fire department representatives were picked by Dr. Stone."

Blair sat back and shook his head. "Surely the SGF will not support a doctor out to make a name for himself by curtailing the rights of a group of people. I mean, I know he is the chair and that putting reps in the field to support the sentinels and guides is a good idea and important, but you don't think he'd use those reps to limit sentinels' and guides' rights?"

"I think it very possible. And as the chair, he is in the position to handpick and influence a lot of people. That's why I got involved and recommended some of the representatives that were sent out to Search & Rescue. It is important not to trample on the groups' rights. Wouldn't you agree, Guide Sandburg?"

Blair blushed and nodded, sighing. "They may have sent me out to push an issue as well," he admitted, considering his new role at the PD.

"How so?"

"Cascade's PD has two sentinel guide pairs and one unbonded sentinel. The unbonded sentinel keeps his senses repressed and refuses a guide. So why assign me to his office and not an office with a working pair?" Blair paused as Stoddard nodded his understanding. "In one of his articles, Stone suggested that

sentinels and guides should have limited choices when it comes to bonding. He suggested it should be regulated by the SGF because some refuse to bond and repress their abilities.”

“So, if your detective is unable to do his job because he’s not bonded...” Stoddard didn’t finish.

“And everyone, Stone included, knows I believe that all sentinels should bond. It’s healthier and safer for them.”

“Blair,” Stoddard answered, soberly. “You must put aside your personal beliefs and analyze the PD situation as an impartial observer. You must consider the detective’s rights.”

“I know and I will. I may not believe a sentinel should go unbonded, but I would never advocate forcing a bond or trampling on a sentinel’s rights,” Blair agreed. Considering the situation, he shook his head.

“I’m not happy about being manipulated either.”

“Consider this, Blair. If the SGF controls the guides and the bonding process and the guides control the sentinels-”

“The SGF could manipulate and control both groups,” Blair cut in.

Stoddard nodded his agreement. “It paints an ugly picture. I will make some discreet inquiries and see if I can find out who else may be working with Stone and why.”

“Good idea. For some reason I think this has an organized feel,” Blair answered, pulling out his notepad. “If I can help...”

“I’ll let you know. Now, why don’t you tell me what brought you here?”

Blair smiled, the professor knew him too well. “James Ellison, the sentinel at the PD who refuses a guide. I got the impression there was some kind of history so I tried to look him up in the database. There is a link to a guide database but the record has been expunged.”

“James Ellison.” Stoddard repeated the name while rubbing his forehead.

Watching Stoddard rub his forehead, Blair imagined Stoddard was trying to pull strings of information out with his fingers. “I believe there was an incident, something to do with a bad guide pairing.” Stoddard looked off for a moment and then shook his head. “I think there was a problem with the guide. Speak with Dr. Buckner. He’ll know more about it.”

“I will, and I’ll keep our conversation in mind as I work with the PD. Thanks Eli.”

Chapter 3

Dr. Buckner was not in, so Blair went home and did a bit more research on Jim Ellison. Using the internet rather than the SGF’s database (which only provided sentinel and guide statistical information and pairings), he found that Ellison had been an army ranger. He had been sent on a mission into the South American jungle but his transport had crashed and he had been presumed dead along with his

men. Ellison survived and spent 18 months with the Chopec Tribe, completing his mission with the aid of the tribe by guarding the Chopec Pass against drug traffickers.

“Isolation,” Blair muttered, “must have brought on his sentinel abilities and I just bet the Chopec knew how to help him.”

Blair found information about Jim’s award as Cop of the Year but there was nothing about him being a sentinel or any problem he might have had with a guide. Deciding he would just have to speak with Jim Ellison, Blair headed off to bed. Tomorrow he would find the elusive detective.

Chapter 4

When Blair walked into the bullpen the next day, he found the place as active as it had been the day before. Moving to his desk in the far corner of the room, Blair noted the phone, the computer he had requested, and the pens, pencils and other stationary he would need. Dropping his backpack, he turned and surveyed the room.

On the other side of the large room, he could see Detectives Rafe and Brown, laughing and speaking with a patrol officer and, somewhat closer, Megan Connor on the phone. But, again, there was no sign of Jim Ellison. Walking over as Megan put down the phone, Blair smiled a greeting, seeing an answering smile from the pretty Australian. “Hi, Ms. Connor,” he began and Megan snorted in a most unladylike manner.

“Hey mate, call me Megan and I’ll call you Sandy.”

“Sandy?”

“Your name’s Sandburg,” she pointed out.

“Then why don’t I call you Connie?”

“No, I don’t look like a Connie.”

“And I look like a Sandy?” Blair asked, good-naturedly.

Megan just smiled in response and Blair smiled back. He didn’t normally use his empathy to read people. It would be admittedly intrusive. He could only read surface emotions anyway, unless it was a sentinel, and one he had bonded to at that. A guide was the counterpoint to a sentinel and the empathy was there to support the sentinel. But even without tapping into his empathy he could feel welcomed by Megan.

“Has Jim Ellison come in yet?” he asked and Megan glanced over at the captain’s office.

“He’s in with Captain Banks. I suggest you steer clear of him today. He’s in a foul mood. More foul than usual,” she added as an after-thought. “The DA wasn’t exactly prepared yesterday and it took the whole day to get anywhere with his testimony. He should have been in and out of court in an hour or two. Instead, he was stuck sitting and waiting all day.”

Blair noted the foul mood, not surprised. He knew a strong sentinel without a guide was prone to headaches which would, in fact, put the sentinel in a foul mood, especially if he had to sit in a smelly courthouse all day repressing his senses.

"I'd really like to meet him," Blair answered. "After all I'm from the SGF and he is a sentinel."

"Jimbo is a sentinel?" Megan looked up in shock. "I had no idea."

Blair bit his lip as he realized this was not general knowledge, though why, he couldn't guess. Sentinels were popular with the public and accepted as guardians. Still, his being less than discreet about Jim Ellison's status could be a problem when he approached the sentinel.

"Could you keep that-" He never got to finish his request as Jim walked out of Simon's office.

Megan, seeing him, called out, "Jimbo, you never told me you were a sentinel," across the bullpen, and as everyone stopped and turned, Jim's head snapped in her direction, his eyes narrowing, suspiciously as he noted Blair beside her.

"What I am is none of your business, Connor," Jim growled loudly as Simon followed Jim out of the office.

Blair felt like crawling under the desk he was assigned. Revealing information that Jim had obviously not wanted to share was not the best way to start working with a sentinel he was there to help. Knowing it was his mistake and he had to correct it, Blair straightened and walked over. "Detective Ellison," he said hesitantly, extending his hand. "My name is Blair Sandburg. I'm a representative from the Sentinel Guide Foundation."

Jim glared at him, not shaking his hand. "Is it the practice of the SGF to give out information without consent?"

"No, of course not," Blair answered, his face turning red at the well-deserved accusation. "I...I apologize, I didn't realize your colleagues were unaware of your sentinel status."

Jim, knowing the bullpen detectives were fairly new and the only people in the department who knew his sentinel status were Joel, Simon, and Rhonda, didn't answer but turned away with what sounded like a growl to Blair and walked across the room to his desk. Blair, watching Jim, realized his desk had been placed as far from Jim's as he could get in the same room, another clue that there was a strange history here. Turning, he started to follow the sentinel, needing to explain but stopped when Simon stepped in front of him.

Blair looked over at Simon who crossed his arms and glared at the SGF rep. "I told you, I will not have your harassing my people."

"I do have to speak with Detective Ellison," Blair countered.

"I'd wait till he cools down. I hate cleaning up blood," Simon suggested, turning and walking back into his office.

As Simon entered his office, Megan sauntered over. "I was wondering why someone who worked with sentinels and guides was assigned here."

"I may not be assigned here much longer," Blair mumbled, more to himself than aloud.

But Megan, hearing the comment, smiled and shook her head, her long brown hair falling about her face in waves. "Ellison's a hard ass," she stated, "but a fair one." She glanced over at Jim's desk where he was logging into his computer. "I guess what he needs is a guide." She turned back to Blair. "Is that why you're here, to find him a guide?"

"I'm here to support the sentinels and guides in this building," Blair answered, toting the party line despite the fact that he had some reservations about whether or not that was true.

"I guess Jim needs the most support since he doesn't have a guide." Megan glanced over Blair thoughtfully. "You're not here as a guide for Jim by any chance?"

Blair shook his head and Megan shrugged before going back to her desk. He watched her for a moment wondering what type of relationship she shared with Jim. On the surface they didn't seem friends, more like rivals, but Blair suspected there was a strong friendship despite appearances.

Glancing across the room, Blair could see Detectives Rafe and Brown calling to Jim and he could hear them asking about Jim being a sentinel and Jim dismissing his abilities, saying they were repressed.

Deciding it was time to meet Jim head on, Blair crossed the bullpen. Blair liked watching movies and did pay some attention to camera angles. In particular, he had noted how sometimes a director would make covering a short distance seem longer by tunneling in on the end point. Until he was heading towards Jim Ellison's desk Blair had never believed it could happen in real life. But as he moved forward, it seemed the distance had doubled and he felt uncomfortable as he passed Detectives Rafe's and Brown's desks and came to stand in front of Jim's.

Jim looked up and Blair could see the wary, almost hostile, look.

"Detective Ellison." Blair pushed back his hair, nervously. "We got off to a bad start, my fault completely," he added quickly. "My name is Blair Sandburg and I'm from the SGF. I am sorry for giving out your status. It was unintentional. I had no idea your colleagues didn't know and who would expect that a sentinel wouldn't shout what they were to the rafters because a sentinel is such an incredible creature and I would never--"

"Slow down, Chief," Jim held up a hand. "Take a breath."

"I'm sorry," Blair repeated, softly, realizing he had said the statement in one fast breath. He did have a tendency to babble when he was nervous. "I'm here to help."

"And just how are you supposed to do that?"

"I can help you find a guide," Blair offered.

"I don't want a guide."

Blair stopped; his eyes wide as he stared down at Jim. He had heard this statement already from Simon Banks, but he couldn't believe it. "That doesn't make sense," he challenged.

“But it is my choice,” Jim answered coolly and Blair could do nothing but nod. “So there really isn’t anything you can do for me,” Jim continued. “Why don’t you go sit in one of the departments with a team? I’m sure you can be of more help there.”

“If you change your mind...” Blair answered looking down at Jim for a moment, watching as the man turned back to his computer, hoping Jim would say something. When Jim didn’t, Blair shrugged and walked back to his desk, more determined than ever to find out about Jim’s history.

Chapter 5

Blair spent the rest of the day alternately working on a paper for publication and Jim Ellison watching. When Jim left to go out in the field and interview a witness, something inside Blair screamed, “Go with him.” Thinking over the reaction, Blair decided it was a guide thing. The guide did not want an unbonded sentinel out alone. Blair knew, with his senses repressed, Jim was safe from zones but it didn’t comfort the part of him that instinctively knew a sentinel would find suppression painful.

Deciding he really needed to know what was going on, Blair picked up the phone and dialed Dr. Buckner’s office and made an appointment to see the professor. Gathering his things, he first went and met the CSU sentinel guide team and then drove over to Rainier, making his way to the SGF office just after five.

“Blair,” Dr. Buckner called out in invitation as Blair walked into his office. “Come in.”

With a quick smile to Dr. Buckner’s secretary, Blair entered the room, taking a seat in front of Buckner’s desk. There were papers strewn all over the desk and Blair glanced down at the piles, shaking his head. He loved Dr. Buckner, the man had been his advisor when he first entered the SGF but then, as now, the man had no filing system. Of course Blair didn’t have any real filing system either, but his ‘office’ was just part of a storage room, so he had to put things where he could. Sometimes he thought he would like to have a filing cabinet but he’d become resigned to keeping things wherever he could put them.

“How are you, Hal?”

“Fine, just reviewing some research. Dr. Grayson, he’s an anthropologist at USC, interviewed a Native American shaman. The shaman retold some historical accounts of sentinels receiving visits by spirit guides and showed him old carvings of spirit animals that belonged to sentinels and guides. He forwarded the information to me. I have never heard of a sentinel claiming to see a spirit or a guide seeing one, for that matter.”

“I’ve heard of shaman seeing sprits when they take spirit walks,” Blair agreed, not adding that he had been told he was a shaman by a member of the Yakama Tribe, though he had yet to take a spirit walk or see a spirit guide. “And I’ve read a few historical references to sentinels seeing spirit animals when their guides were in danger, but I haven’t heard any modern accounts of them.” Blair frowned thoughtfully. “I wonder if that’s because modern sentinels and guides don’t want to accept spirits or they don’t want to admit they see them?”

"In either case, it could prove a fascinating bit of research." Buckner glanced at his guest. "I take it something is on your mind. What brings you to my door?"

Blair nodded, thinking over his conversation with Eli Stoddard. He debated whether or not he should ask Buckner's opinion about sending out SGF reps to assist sentinels and guides, but decided to leave that for later. Right now he needed to deal with the problem of Jim Ellison. "I'm the SGF rep at Cascade's central PD. They have a detective sentinel there named Jim Ellison. He is refusing a guide." Blair glanced over at Buckner. "I'm sure there is a reason, so I looked him up in the database and found a reference to a record that no longer exists."

"Jim Ellison," Buckner said the name and nodded. "Yes, I remember something of this. Ellison was a late bloomer but came online after an isolated stake out or some such thing. His senses tested at the top end of the scale. Because his senses came on so abruptly, he was spiking painfully. We were afraid he would go into a deep zone and we would lose him. He needed a guide immediately.

"His father, William Ellison, a big contributor to Rainier, spoke with Chancellor Edwards and insisted on a guide with wealthy, corporate connections." Buckner paused, thinking back. "Yes, that was it. His father didn't approve of Ellison's profession. He believed if Ellison's guide were involved in another field, the guide could lure the sentinel away from the PD. His father was treating the sentinel guide experience like some kind of corporate merge. And Jim Ellison was so inundated by stimuli and so out of it, he didn't know what was going on. Because of his state, his father claimed legal rights over Ellison, stating he was temporarily incapacitated and his father and Chancellor Edwards arranged the guide match.

"Ellison ended up with a very low ranked guide, Brad Ventriss. His father is the industrialist, Norman Ventriss. It was a bad match. Ellison is a very strong sentinel and needed a strong guide, and Brad Ventriss had low empathic abilities and wanted to use sentinel abilities for profit. He didn't want anything to do with cops or any other protective service."

"Sentinels and guides are wired to protect the tribe," Blair objected, cutting in, and Buckner nodded.

"If Norman Ventriss wasn't Brad's father, I doubt he would have been placed in the guide database at all," Buckner agreed. "Norman Ventriss wanted the prestige of a guide in his family. And Brad, he knew more about how to harm a sentinel than help one. He did not have the mindset of a guide. From what I have been told, he shouldn't have been tested for guide abilities. Anyway, I don't think I ever knew what happened, but something did, and Ventriss was removed from the guide database."

"But if he and Jim had bonded..."

"I don't think they had more than a surface bond. I doubt Ventriss had enough ability to develop a deeper bond, which was a lucky thing for Ellison. I didn't realize Ellison never took another guide."

"Where can I find out what happened?" Blair whispered. He knew this was a private matter and he had no business poking his nose in it. But he wanted to help Jim and, though he would never admit it, he was curious about what had happened.

"I don't actually know," Buckner answered. "Whatever did happen, it was hushed up. Chancellor Edwards had a hand in that but she didn't get away blemish free. The SGF adopted rules that would require that any guides nominated by Rainer be vetted by the SGF."

"What happened to Ventriss?"

"He was expelled from the SGF and his guide listing repealed. The last I heard, I believe he was dropping out of Rainer. I would imagine he went to work for his father."

"Sentinel guide bonding always becomes an issue when people who don't understand who and what guides and sentinels are get involved." Blair shook his head with annoyance. "I don't understand how someone who has no clue what it means can try and dictate the bond. Especially since the bond is a lifetime commitment."

"Agreed. I believe that is why Dr. Stone is heading up a group trying to give the SGF some say in bonding."

"Don't you think that should be left to the sentinel and guide?" Blair asked, cautiously, picking his words carefully, and trying to hide his surprise at the suggestion. Blair couldn't believe that Dr. Buckner would back such an invasive policy, but he needed to be careful how he framed his objection. He didn't want to close down Dr. Buckner as a resource. Buckner had a hand on the pulse of the SGF. But morally, Blair had to speak out against that kind of limitation of freedom.

"In most cases, I would agree with you. But in the case of an incapacitated sentinel, like Jim Ellison, perhaps the SGF should have some say."

"Weren't they involved in the failed guide's selection and didn't they accredit him as a guide?"

"Well, yes, but..." Buckner paused thoughtfully and then nodded. "You are right, point taken." He smiled at Blair. "Sometimes in a rush to help the sentinels when their senses are out of control, you can forget they are intelligent human beings and should be allowed to make their own informed decisions."

Blair smiled at Buckner. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions, Hal. Historically, when a group's rights were curtailed," he held up his fingers making quotes in the air, "for their own good, that group declined or was enslaved."

"I certainly wouldn't want to see that happen to sentinels or guides," Buckner answered.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Blair made his way into the bullpen and over to his desk. Putting down his papers, he glanced over at Jim's desk. Jim wasn't there and Blair turned back looking for Megan Connor. The Australian was missing as well, so Blair logged into his computer and making sure no one was watching, ran a search on Brad Ventriss. Mostly, he found information about his father and corporate deals and

acquisitions. There was a notation about Brad joining the firm but nothing that would help Blair understand what had happened between Jim and Brad.

Closing the site and, after a moment's thought, clearing the cache to hide his tracks, Blair made his way to the break room to get some coffee.

"Hey Sandy," Megan called out from where she was making a cup of tea and indicated he should come over. Detectives Rafe and Brown were also there getting coffee.

"Hi Hairboy," Brown offered with a smile and Blair realized this was the first time the detective had reached out to him in a friendly manner. Chief, Sandy, Hairboy; Blair wondered if anyone knew how to use a person's name in this place.

"Hi." He went over and accepted a cup of Megan's tea.

"Connor was telling us that you're here to support Jim because he's a sentinel."

It was offered as a statement but Blair could hear the question in it. "Detective Ellison and the two teams," he answered, deciding if these detectives hadn't known Jim was a sentinel, they couldn't know what had happened with Ventriss.

"But stationed with us because Jim doesn't have a guide," Rafe asked, entering the conversation, and Blair nodded, realizing he had been unwelcome because they had thought him some sort of departmental spy. "I never knew he was a sentinel."

"A sentinel without a guide can't do what a sentinel does," Megan answered before Blair did. "It's not an easy thing for a sentinel to live without one, is it?" Megan asked turning back to Blair. Feeling uncomfortable with the conversation and knowing he had already given away one confidence, Blair simply nodded. "Well then mate, don't you think you should find Jim a guide?"

"That's not for me to do, Jim...uh...Detective Ellison would have to do that."

Before the conversation could go any further, Jim Ellison walked in the room. The silence that followed was deafening and Blair watched him raise an eyebrow as he looked around at the detectives before his gaze settled on Blair. "Something someone wants to discuss?" he asked, quietly.

Blair, Rafe and Brown shook their heads no as Megan looked over Jim. "You know mate, your life would be a hell of a lot easier if you got a guide."

"I'm not interested."

"My second cousin, Tony, is a sentinel," Megan continued, as if Jim hadn't spoken. "He, and his guide, Marie, are an amazing pair."

"Good for your cousin," Jim answered sarcastically as he reached for the coffee pot. "But that has nothing to do with me." With those words, coffee in hand, Jim stalked out of the room. Blair watched him go as Megan shook her head.

She glanced at Blair and spread her hands as Brown and Rafe headed back to their desks. "It is his right," Blair whispered before leaving the room.

In the bullpen, as Blair headed towards his desk, Simon came out of his office and beckoned him over, and then called Jim. Indicating his office, he stepped back inside and Jim followed him in, taking a seat on the window ledge. Blair took the seat Simon indicated.

"Jim, you're next in rotation and there's been a murder over at the SGF office at Rainier that's been bumped up to us, mostly because it happened at the SGF and the Mayor wants to show his support for sentinels and guides by giving the case to Major Crimes. I'll understand if you want me to switch you off for a different case." The captain turned to look at his detective, clearly concerned.

For a moment, Blair sat stunned. If it was someone in the SGF office than Blair had to know him or her. He knew everyone in that office. "Who?" Blair asked softly, his eyes wide with concern.

Simon looked over at the SGF rep, his features softening as he realized this was a shock for Blair. "A Dr. Vincent Stone," he answered, and watched Blair sit back, stunned.

"Dr. Stone," Blair repeated, softly.

"Is he a friend of yours, Sandburg?" Jim looked over at Blair, for the first time sounding approachable.

Blair shook his head. "More a colleague than a friend. He's co-chair of the department."

"I don't suppose the other half of that co-chair might have wanted to be the only chair," Jim asked.

Blair shook his head again. "I can't say I know Dr. Brennan at all. I've only met him at full faculty meetings. But, I do know, Dr. Brennan barely has time to meet his obligations as co-chair. In any case, he's at a conference in Boston this week. When did he..." He paused, trying to get his head around the idea that Dr. Stone was murdered in the SGF office.

"The Coroner thinks it happened around lunchtime yesterday. His secretary was off yesterday; when she came in this morning she found him," Simon answered before glancing at Jim. "You'll take the case?" he asked. Jim nodded. "You might have some interference from the SGF. I'm sure they will want to supply some sentinels and guides to help out, but this is a police matter." Simon paused as Jim grimaced. Simon then glanced over at Blair. "You might want to take Dr. Sandburg with you. The SGF will feel we are using their resources and he'll have insight into that office. Anyway, he's got an airtight alibi. He was here when the murder happened."

Jim stood and glanced over Blair, seeing the effect the news had on the young man. Walking over he let a hand rest on Blair's shoulder in support. "Come on, Chief. I'll get you a cup of coffee and you can tell me all about Dr. Stone and the SGF."

Blair glanced up at Jim in surprise. "I only knew him professionally. We didn't travel in the same social circles."

"You never know what someone may know without realizing they know it," Jim answered as he led Blair to the break room where he poured two cups of coffee. Jim then headed over to a small interrogation

room, Blair following, and set the cups down on the table taking a seat. "What kind of man was Dr. Stone?" Jim asked when Blair had taken a seat and put his hands around the coffee cup.

Blair looked at the detective. He really didn't want to talk badly of the dead, but Blair knew Stone was a pompous, self-absorbed man who was willing to trample sentinels' and guides' rights to make a name for himself. "Um...he was outspoken in his beliefs. He felt there should be laws protecting sentinels and guides."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked, with a frown, not sure he liked where the statement was leading.

"He felt sentinels should not be allowed in certain professions and," Blair glanced at Jim, "that sentinel bonding should be regulated by the SGF."

"Regulated," Jim repeated, coldly. This was not sounding good to him.

Blair nodded. "It's just what you think, man. Dr. Stone believed the SGF should have a say in sentinel guide bonding."

"You agree with that?" Jim challenged, glancing over the doctor.

"No." Blair shook his head. "I believe sentinels should bond, it is too painful for them if they don't," Blair answered turning his gaze on Jim, daring him to say otherwise. "But I don't think anyone but the sentinel and guide should be involved in the choice."

Jim nodded, relieved. If Sandburg were here with some kind of forced bonding issue than Jim would have to find a way of getting rid of him. As it was, Jim knew, first hand, no one should decide on a bond except the person doing the bonding. Trying not to think about the past, Jim pulled out a small pad and pencil. "Do you know of any enemies that Dr. Stone might have had?"

"I don't know him outside of the SGF," Blair answered and Jim was sure there was more to the answer.

"But..." Jim prompted.

Blair pushed back at his hair, nervously. "He wanted to head up an organization that regulated the lives of sentinels and guides. Most of his colleagues didn't know just how extreme some of his ideas were. For the most part, he kept them under wraps. But he wanted to control where sentinels lived, who sentinels and guides bonded with, and where they worked."

"In other words, he wanted to enslave sentinels and guides," Jim concluded.

"It would never happen, the SGF-"

"Is making quite a name for itself sending out reps to protect the poor little sentinels and guides," Jim answered, coldly.

"It's not like that, Jim. We're here to help."

"You know I have a friend in the fire department, Mitch Reeves. I saw him last night. You know what he told me? The SGF rep walked in and before he even looked around, he demanded that all sentinels and

their guides be removed from active service in the fire department. And Mitch told me that the same thing happened in the other fire departments. How is that helping us, Sandburg?"

"Okay, the fire department reps were definitely going too far," Blair agreed. "And they were handpicked by Dr. Stone. But he's not the only member of the SGF and he can't make policy by himself."

"Don't ask me to trust the SGF, Sandburg," Jim answered angrily. "They may say they want to help but they have an agenda and we both know what it is."

Hearing this, Blair realized that Jim didn't trust him, and thinking over the situation, he couldn't really blame Jim. To Jim, Blair represented the enemy.

He was interrupted from his thoughts when Jim asked, "Did Dr. Stone have any family, maybe a wife or children or a mistress?"

"I think he might have mentioned a sister once, but he wasn't married and didn't have any children, at least as far as I know. I really don't know much about him."

"Okay, before I head over there, is there anything else I should know?"

"I am going with you," Blair protested.

"I don't think so, Sandburg. You're not a cop."

"But I do know what's going on and who you should speak with about it. And Captain Banks said you should take me." Blair realized he sounded like a petulant child, but he didn't care. Until this murder was solved he was sticking close to Jim Ellison.

Jim glared at him in response, and Blair, already feeling like a child after threatening to tell Simon Banks that the detective was ignoring an order, stuck his tongue out at Jim. He wasn't sure what Jim would do in response but when Jim chuckled, the corners of his lips turning up in a smile, Blair relaxed.

"Okay, Chief. But you do what I tell you. We are going to a crime scene and conducting an investigation. There are rules and procedures we have to follow."

"No problem, Jim."

Chapter 7

Blair and Jim drove to Rainier in almost companionable silence. As far as Jim was concerned, judgment about the SGF rep was still out, but Jim did get the impression that Blair did not have the same agenda as Dr. Stone. Having heard what Blair said about the co-chair of the SGF, Jim thought Blair really was against curtailing sentinels' and guides' freedoms. There was something else that Jim noticed about the young man, an almost enticing scent. Jim always kept his senses locked down when he was at work, so he only got brief whiffs of it here and there, but the scent was spicy and sweet and, for lack of another term, tasty.

Following Blair's directions, he drove around the back of Rainier's anthropology building and parked at the side of the SGF building, just beyond the emergency vehicles. Out front the entrance was already cordoned off, patrol cars with lights flashing posted before the entrance where patrol officers kept curious teachers and students out. Ducking under yellow tape, Jim nodded to the officer who was politely, but firmly, refusing entrance to non-police personnel and indicated Blair. "Hi, Tony, he's with me," he told the officer, who stepped aside and let Blair pass.

"Hi Jim." The officer turned to Jim. "Dan Wolf's in there."

"Good, any info I should know about before walking in?"

Tony shrugged. "Forensics' people are working the scene. They may know something. The secretary, April Smith, found the body. She is in," Tony glanced at his pad, "the faculty lounge. My partner, Pete, is with her and has her statement."

"Thanks." Jim started up the stairs to the SGF office. "You wouldn't know April Smith by any chance?" Jim asked Blair.

"She's Dr. Stone's personal secretary. She's a nice lady," Blair added, as Jim followed the trail of people to an office.

Putting on gloves, Jim walked in and over to the desk, absently noting the various crystal knickknacks and paperweights. On the floor behind the desk was the body of Dr. Stone. It was obvious that he had been hit on the head with something heavy, the dried blood covering part of his face. Behind Jim, Blair gasped and Jim turned as Blair said softly, "I'll just wait over there," indicating the hall. Jim watched him go and then turned and crouched down beside Dan Wolf.

"Hey Dan, was the blow to the head the cause of death?"

"I'll confirm it when I do the autopsy, but in all probability, yes." Slowly, Dan turned Dr. Stone's head, and Jim could see that half his head was crushed.

"That had to be done with something very heavy." Jim stood and looked around the room, speculatively, trying to find something large enough to do the kind of damage that Dr. Stone had been dealt. There were various forensics personnel dusting down areas near the body and he looked past them at the other side of the room.

On top of a tall file cabinet Jim noticed a large trophy with a marble base. Moving over to it, he read the inscription. "*In recognition of outstanding work to improve the lives of sentinels and guides.*" Jim could easily see the object had been moved from its resting place, the dust around it displaced. "I bet this is the weapon," he muttered, wondering why the perp would return the item to its place on the shelf. Why not just leave it on the floor with the body? Jim guessed maybe the weapon had been wiped down and then placed back on the shelf. Deciding he needed pictures of the cabinet before the weapon was tagged, he called over one of the CSU techs, pointing to the trophy. "Get a picture of this. I bet you'll find blood and tissue on the trophy."

"What makes you think this is the weapon?" the tech asked. "I mean it could be, but--"

"Don't you see the disturbed dust?" Jim pointed around the base.

The tech looked at the base and then up at Jim. "You must have sharp eyes," he commented. "I don't see anything, but I'll bag it."

Jim nodded, wondering if the CSU tech needed glasses as he glanced around the office one more time. Making a mental note that he would want to review the contents of Stone's laptop, the file cabinet and the desk drawers, he turned toward the door. He needed to speak with Dr. Stone's secretary, April Smith. Stepping out into the hall, Jim saw Blair leaning on a nearby wall. The SGF rep seemed rather pale, as he watched the forensic people moving around. Jim supposed this was the first time he had ever been at a murder scene. Walking over, he let a hand rest on Blair's shoulder.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, it's just that it's really nothing like TV."

Jim nodded his agreement before looking around. "I have to interview Stone's secretary. If you're not up to it..." Jim offered.

"No, I know April. I should go with you."

"If you're sure," Jim answered. "Where's the faculty lounge?"

"Last door on the left," Blair started down the hall.

At the door, Jim watched as Blair visibly straightened before pushing open the door.

The room was small with two tables that could accommodate six people each, a large soda vending machine, a refrigerator, sink, and coffee pot. In other words, all the things you would find in a break room. As Jim glanced around he noted at one end of the table a fortyish woman with graying hair, neatly tied back. She was holding tissues in her hand and it was obvious from the red eyes that she had been crying.

"April." Blair spoke softly, stepping forward. "This must have been such a horrible shock for you."

April stood and stepped over to Blair, hugging him. "I found Dr. Stone this morning when I came in."

Blair nodded sympathetically as Jim, with a nod to the officer standing watch, stepped over. "Ms. Smith, my name is Detective Ellison. I know that the officers have taken your statement but I need to ask you some questions."

Pulling back from Blair, April looked up at Jim. "Of course," she mumbled and Jim indicated the seat at the table. Blair took the seat beside her and held her hand as Jim sat across from her.

"Let's start with this morning. Tell me how your day started, when you got here. Walk me through it," Jim gave her an encouraging smile.

"Well..." April hesitated momentarily. "I came in at the usual time. I take the down town bus and get here at 8:40. I went into the SGF main office to pick up Dr. Stone's mail."

"Was there anyone else in the office?"

"No, Margie-"

"That would be Dr. Brennan's secretary," Blair cut in and April nodded her agreement as Jim signaled for her to continue.

"Margie," she repeated, gathering her thoughts. "When Dr. Brennan's out of town, she comes in a little later. Because it's not so busy," she added quickly and Jim smiled to show his understanding. "Anyway, I got Dr. Stone's mail and went to my desk. Sometimes Dr. Stone is already here, so I knocked on the door and then...then I opened it and saw him on the floor."

"So the office was unlocked but the door was closed when you got there?"

"Yes."

"Is that normally the case?"

"Dr. Stone locks his door when he leaves for the night, but during the day it is usually unlocked."

"Usually?" Jim questioned.

"Sometimes he has private meetings with Dr. Howard from the legal department or some of the TAs. When he has those meetings he locks the door and tells me to hold all phone calls."

"I see. Had Dr. Stone been acting different lately? Anything different from his usual routines, unusual visitors, strange messages?" Jim pressed.

"No, well, maybe." The secretary paused to take a sip of water from a glass on the table. "He was going to have a meeting next week with a senator and Chancellor Edwards. Dr. Stone didn't normally talk to me about SGF business and he didn't confide in men - but he did mention something about a meeting with a senator and Chancellor Edwards. He was very excited about it and was going to have me order all kinds of finger foods." April Smith glanced up at Jim. "He always had me serve coffee at his staff meetings and sometimes some donuts but he was planning to have me order some very expensive dishes for this meeting. He said something about this meeting changing the role of the SGF."

Jim nodded and April shrugged. "That's all he said about it."

"Do you know which senator he was meeting with?"

"He didn't say."

"And when was the meeting to take place?"

"Next Thursday at noon, in his office."

Jim jotted down some quick notes on a small pad of paper. "Thank you, Ms. Smith. At some point we'll need you to come to the station and sign your statement. In the meantime, one of the officers will take you home."

She nodded looking a little lost and turned to Blair. "I know it is selfish to think of this, but I don't know what is going to happen about my job now."

"It's understandable." Blair squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I hear Dr. Stoddard's secretary is moving over to the bursar's office. She wants to work part time and Dr. Stoddard needs a full time secretary. You might want to talk with him."

"Thanks, Blair." She wiped her eyes as Jim walked out the door and Blair stood to follow him.

In the hall, Jim told the officer to get Ms. Smith's contact information and take her home, before turning to Blair. "What kind of meeting would Stone be having with a senator and the Chancellor?"

Blair wanted to say, "Nothing good I'm sure," but settled for a shake of his head.

"Maybe his files will give us some kind of clue. Once they're tagged, I'll get a look through them. In the meantime, I think I need to visit the chancellor."

"Her name is Edwards and she is not very friendly," Blair warned.

"Yeah, well, in case you haven't noticed, neither am I." Jim started down the hall and out the door, looking around the campus, trying to decide which building housed the head of the university.

"Her office is in the building with the tower." Blair pointed, guessing why Jim was looking around.

Jim nodded and glanced over at the SGF official. This was Sandburg's world and Jim didn't want to get him into trouble with the head of the university. Jim had no problem storming in and demanding information from the chancellor but he didn't want Blair to face repercussions from his actions. "Why don't you wait here while I interview the chancellor? Where's your office, anyway?"

"I teach anthropology classes so my office is in the anthro building, Hargrove Hall." Blair pointed to a building in the distance.

"I thought you were part of the SGF?"

"I am, but my degree is in anthropology. I teach anthro classes two days a week, have office hours a half day a week and work as part of the SGF for two and a half days a week."

"Right." Jim noted the packed schedule as he glanced at the building in the distance. "I'm going to see if Chancellor Edwards is available." He turned back to Blair. "Can you get me a list of all the members of the SGF at Rainier? I will need to interview people."

"Sure, I'll be in my office at Hargrove. Anyone can point you to my office."

Jim nodded and walked off.

It didn't take Jim long to find the chancellor's office and he walked in and looked at the secretary, extending his badge. "Hello, I'm Detective Ellison. I need to speak with Chancellor Edwards."

"Is this regarding Dr. Stone?" the woman asked and Jim nodded. "One moment, please." She picked up a phone and told the chancellor a detective was asking to speak with her.

Jim could clearly hear the chancellor's voice as she snapped, "Damn it, I don't have time for this," and Jim wondered why the woman would be yelling into the phone. There was a pause and then Edwards said, "Send him in." Jim smiled as the secretary opened the door and led him into the large, ornate office.

The chancellor's office was designed to impress visitors. There were floor to ceiling shelves made of polished wood running along two walls, dotted with several expensive looking artifacts and books, a third wall was a large window that looked out over the university commons and, in the center of the room, the chancellor's desk, a monstrosity made out of mahogany.

Walking into the room, Jim watched as Edwards stood with a forced smile. "Detective Ellison," she intoned, her voice pitched low. "I presume you are here regarding Dr. Stone."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm the lead detective and I'd like to ask you a few questions--"

"Of course," she answered, indicating that Jim should take the seat before her desk. Sitting back she looked over Jim as he made a show of pulling out a small notebook.

"We are looking at Dr. Stone's appointments. I understand he was having a meeting next week with you and a senator." Jim looked up and noted Edwards was uncomfortable with the topic, a frown creasing her brow. "Could you tell me the name of the senator?"

"I'm sure the senator had nothing to do with Dr. Stone's death."

"That may be, but it could just as easily be someone after the senator. The senator's name?" Jim repeated firmly, but politely.

Edwards considered the request and then sighed. "Senator Burns. He heads the committee on sentinels and guides."

"And the nature of the meeting?" Jim continued.

"We were going to discuss legislation that would support sentinels and guides."

"I see," Jim made a notation. "Was anyone else going to attend the meeting?"

"Yes, Dr. Howard. He's a professor in our legal department."

Jim again looked at Edwards. "Can you think of anyone who might have had problems with Dr. Stone, any colleagues, students?"

"No, of course not," Edwards answered, her voice going up an octave and Jim had to work to keep from wincing at the sound. "Dr. Stone was respected by the university and loved by his students."

Based on what Blair had told him, Jim doubted the truth of that statement, but he kept his expression completely neutral as he made a notation in his book before handing Edwards his card. "I thank you for your time. If I have any more questions I will contact you. We will make this investigation a high priority." Jim stood and turned to leave, but then turned back. "Can you tell me where the meeting with the senator was going to take place, and when?"

“Dr. Stone’s office on Thursday.”

Jim nodded and walked out the door.

Wading through a sea of students, Jim made his way across the commons to Hargrove Hall and Blair Sandburg’s office. Blair didn’t have a personal secretary and the door was open so Jim rapped lightly and walked in, glancing around.

Blair’s office was, without a doubt, the complete opposite of the Chancellor’s. There were papers and artifacts strewn across every countertop and piles of files on his desk. Looking around at the chaos, Jim shook his head in dismay as Blair, looking up and seeing Jim in the doorway, jumped up and dumped some papers from a chair to give the detective a seat. “Hey, Jim,” he offered with a bright smile. “How did things go with the dragon lady?”

“An interesting name for her,” Jim commented, taking the seat. “Did you get the list?”

Blair handed it over and Jim took a quick glance over it, noting that Dr. Howard wasn’t on the list as a member of the SGF. “Do you know Dr. Howard?”

“Not really. He’s a law professor. I sat in on a seminar he once gave on the debate over archaeology and artifact acquisition, but that’s about it.”

“So, if the chancellor and Dr. Stone were meeting with him and Senator Burns, it might have something to do with legal issues and SGF policy.”

“In all probability,” Blair agreed.

“And they were going to meet in Dr. Stone’s office, not nearly as nice as the chancellor’s,” Jim continued. “Dr. Stone, being in the SGF, would have a white noise generator in his room, where the chancellor’s office has that big window that wouldn’t block sound.”

“They were planning something they didn’t want heard,” Blair said softly and Jim nodded.

“I think I’ll have a chat with Dr. Howard.” Jim stood and turned, still holding Blair’s list, as Blair grabbed his book bag stuffing his laptop in it. “Thanks, I’ll take it from here.”

“Oh no, I’m your partner for this investigation,” Blair answered, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“Anyway, I might have a better chance of ferreting out some of the information -” he paused at the look Jim gave him. “Well, at least here at Rainier, I might.

Chapter 8

Dr. Howard was teaching a class when the pair made their way to the law building. Having looked up the law professor’s schedule, and knowing the class he was teaching ended in just a few moments, they quietly sat down at the back of the lecture hall as a student raised her hand.

"Dr. Howard," she asked. "I understand that environmental law is there to protect natural resources, namely property. If we applied that law to sentinels, wouldn't we be calling them property? And wouldn't that conflict with the 13th amendment abolishing slavery?"

Dr. Howard smiled at the woman. "Good questions, Ms. Grant. So, let me give you a hypothetical situation to consider for our next class. What if the environment were killing sentinels and they were becoming extinct. Are they a natural resource? What should be done? Should the government get involved? What laws could and should the government pass to protect them and under what statutes? I would like to hear arguments both for and against governmental interventions and regulations. It should make for an interesting discussion next time. Class dismissed."

As the students started to file out, Jim and Blair made their way down to the front of the room. Dr. Howard was there gathering his notes and looked up. "Doctor Howard," Jim held up his badge. "I'm Detective Ellison. This is Professor Sandburg of the SGF. I have a few questions."

"Is this about the death of Dr. Stone?"

"Yes, sir."

Howard nodded. "Why don't we go to my office?" he suggested, gathering his things and leading the way to his office. It was an impressive room, designed like a study, with bookcases loaded with law volumes, a deep pile carpet and a large desk. Dr. Howard took a seat at the desk offering them both chairs across from him, his eyes moving over Jim with interest.

"I understand you and Dr. Stone were working together," Jim stated.

"Working together," Howard repeated. "I wouldn't say we *worked* together. However, he often asked legal advice for the SGF. As a colleague at Rainier, I would try and help him understand the intricacies of the law and apply it to sentinels and guides."

"Can you tell me what he was working on?" Jim continued.

"Normally, I would consider that confidential, a question of attorney client privilege, but I don't believe he was making a secret of his actions. He was considering trying to pass legislation that would improve the lives of sentinels."

"Improve their lives?" Jim questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm afraid he was barely at the proposal stage."

"So, you were going to meet with Senator Burns to hash out some ideas," Jim pushed.

"Yes, I believe Senator Burns and Dr. Stone were friends. I was to be there in a consultant capacity."

"And the Chancellor?" Jim asked.

"The SGF is affiliated with Rainier, so she intended to be part of the meeting."

Jim nodded. "Can you think of anyone who would want to harm Dr. Stone?"

"I don't know much about his private life and he was dedicated to protecting sentinels and guides, so no."

"Dr. Howard, how do you define protection?" Blair asked joining the discussion.

"Well, that was something we were still working out," he answered, with a cool smile that left Jim with the impression of a barracuda getting ready to bite.

Blair, undaunted, continued with a forced smile. "Dr. Stone believed sentinels should be required to live in controlled environments regulated by the SGF. Is that the legislation he was considering? Or was it that SGF should be involved in bonding and selecting guides for sentinels and that guides should have certain legal rights over sentinels?"

Howard considered Blair for a moment, before offering the chilling smile again. "As I said, Dr. Stone was still working on his ideas." Howard's attention turned back to Jim. "How are you doing, Sentinel Ellison? I mean after losing Ventriss as a guide."

Jim looked surprised and then his gaze narrowed as Howard smirked. Jim was sure the doctor was deliberately ruffling his feathers, trying to get some kind of reaction.

"I represented Ventriss when he tried to keep his guide accreditation after the SGF had revoked it. Such a shame that the young man had to give up his guide standing and over a small misunderstanding between sentinel and guide."

"He was no guide," Jim answered coldly and watched Howard shrug. "Getting back to the questions at hand, can you tell me what Senator Burns thought of the legislation the SGF was considering?" Jim continued, deliberately keeping inflection out of his voice to hide his distaste for this man.

"He was all for protecting sentinels. After all, you do have so many environmental issues that can disrupt your health and senses," Howard's tone was condescending and Jim had to take a deep breath to keep from jumping down the man's throat. Or maybe, reaching out and letting his hands close around that throat.

"I see." Jim's voice would freeze water. "Was anyone else attending the meeting?"

"Not as far as I know."

Jim nodded, knowing he wasn't going to get much more out of Howard. "Thank you for your time. Should you think of anything -" He held out his card.

"Of course." Howard inclined his head.

Out in the hall Jim closed his eyes momentarily, trying to get his anger under control. Blair, beside him, sensing the anger, put a hand on his arm. "Let the anger go," he said softly. "He's just a jerk trying to upset you."

"Yeah, he's a jerk who has a senator, Rainier's chancellor, and the head of the SGF listening to him."

Blair sighed and shook his head. "Dr. Stone's theories were not taken seriously by the SGF community. Dr. Brennan went so far as to call him a crackpot." He glanced up at Jim. "Some of the reforms he instituted really would help but most weren't being taken seriously."

"Which reforms were okay with you, Dr. Sandburg?" Blair could hear the snarl in Jim's voice, but decided to answer the question anyway.

"I think it is a good idea having someone from the SGF available in the workplace as an advocate for sentinels and guides. He arranged the government grant for that, probably with the help of the senator. And he was going to try and pass a law that would allow a guide to make medical decisions if the sentinel was incapacitated."

"Instead of the sentinel's family or designee?"

Blair shrugged. "Whether the bond is sexual or not, after bonding a guide becomes the sentinel's family. And who would know better than the guide what the sentinel's needs and wishes are?"

"You're running under the assumption that the guide has the sentinel's best interests at heart."

Blair paused, reminding himself that Jim had been bonded with someone who should never have been given guide standing and again wondered what had happened. "A true guide's first loyalty and concern is for his sentinel. Everything else is eclipsed by that concern, man."

Jim shrugged and started down the hall, obviously not convinced of that. "I'm going to make an appointment to see Senator Burns. In the meantime, I want to get a look at Stone's files."

Blair hesitated and then taking a breath said, "You might need a search warrant. I'm not sure the SGF will allow anyone to see those files without one."

Jim stopped and turned, "Why the hell not?"

"They include personal information about sentinels and guides. Sense test scores, empathy test scores. He was studying successful pairings, trying to work out what made certain sentinels and guides compatible when others were not."

"Any other information?" Jim asked suspiciously.

"Bonding information."

"What kind of bonding information?"

"Just pairing information, I would guess. How they paired, how long until a bond formed, again looking to see what made certain pairs compatible. He wanted the SGF to have some say in bonding. He would never be able to do that if he didn't work out why some sentinels and guides are compatible when others are not. But the information in those files is personal and I still think they might want a search warrant to cover their asses."

Jim nodded and Blair would swear he could feel the level of suspicion drop. And then it dawned on Blair, he was fine tuning into Jim's emotions, just the way a sentinel's guide would.

“I’ll call Simon for a search warrant. Good suggestion, Doctor.” As Jim said this, he pulled out his phone and continued walking down the hall, Blair following him, his own empathic feelings running through his mind.

Chapter 9

Once the warrant was procured and the files tagged, Dr. Stone’s files were boxed and sent to the PD for review. Jim had requisitioned one of the smaller conference rooms and had the boxes delivered there. The boxes were stacked on the table, four representing the cabinet drawers and one that included all files and folders in Stone’s desk. Blair was there when the courier arrived with the boxes, and despite the fact that Jim had pretty much ignored him since their return from Rainier, he followed Jim into the room, pulling up a chair.

Jim glanced over at him and then back at the boxes, resigned. Pushing one of the boxes over toward Blair, he said, “Catalog each folder. If you see anything strange, flag it.”

Blair nodded, and the pair went through the boxes that had filled the cabinet. They didn’t find anything that would help in their investigation in the files, so as Blair finished the last filing cabinet box, Jim turned his attention to the box containing items from Dr. Stone’s desk.

There were memos from the teams that had been sent into the field, some complaining about their reception. There were notes about the fire department’s response to SGF reps demanding that all sentinels and guides be pulled from line duty. In the corner of one of these notes Dr. Stone had written, “Get the guides to side with the SGF on this issue.” On another note, Dr. Stone had written, “Expose environmental factors that disrupt sentinels – create factors if necessary.”

Jim read that note twice and wordlessly handed it to Blair, who, reading it, cursed. “I knew he was obsessed, but I never thought he would endanger a sentinel to further his agenda.”

“He was a fanatic,” Jim answered. “Fanatics only see things in terms of their agenda.”

Blair nodded his agreement, as Jim picked up another memo and frowned. Blair’s name was on the memo. It was dated two months ago. It read:

TO: Chancellor Edwards, Rainier University

FROM: Dr. Stone, Co-Chair, Sentinel/Guide Foundation

RE: Representatives in the workforce

Chancellor, I request that Blair Sandburg be released from some of his teaching duties. As a member of the SGF, he could be invaluable as one of the representatives overseeing sentinels and guides in the workforce.

Dr. Sandburg is an advocate for bonding. He will, in all likelihood, be rather outspoken about Major Crimes’ unbonded sentinel, James Ellison. I am sure that a situation will arise that will illustrate Ellison’s need for a

bond. We may use this as proof that the SGF should undertake bonding and Rainier University and the SGF should work together to alleviate the suffering of sentinels.

Should Ellison, or sentinels in general, make a fuss about this, we can cite the "unfortunate" bonding of Ellison to Ventriss.

Ellison could be a test case for moving forward with this legislation.

Jim looked over the memo and then tossed it to Sandburg. "What do you know about this, Sandburg?" he asked, coldly.

Blair looked up. He could feel anger rising in the sentinel and he blinked in surprise before reaching for the memo. He read it, mostly in shock, and then looked at Jim. "I never saw-"

"Were you going to create a situation that would illustrate how the poor little sentinel needs a guide to help him?" Jim accused.

"No, I wasn't!" Blair declared, his own anger rising at the accusation. He couldn't believe anyone would think he would deliberately endanger a sentinel, for any reason. He was a guide for goodness sakes! Blair paused, running a hand through his hair, nervously. He knew Jim didn't know he was a guide. With his senses repressed, he wouldn't feel the pull of a guide. "I would never force a sentinel to bond. I didn't know about this memo."

"But you knew you were here to further someone's agenda."

"I figured that out pretty quickly, when I met you," Blair admitted. "But I didn't come into this situation with anyone's agenda or preconceived ideas."

Jim looked Blair over. He was a good judge of character and he was pretty sure Blair was being straight with him. "I'd like an explanation of your role in the SGF," he demanded.

Blair bristled at the tone but admitted to himself that his association with the SGF was reasonable grounds for suspicion.

"I'm an anthropologist," Blair began. "So I really do a lot of work with the history of sentinels and guides. I study their place in tribal hierarchies. I study some of the myths and legends around them. I also help the SGF with newly emerging sentinels. I help test their senses."

"In order to do that-" Jim paused as he considered the implications of Blair's last statement.

"Yes, I am an unbonded guide," Blair admitted. "A bonded guide cannot test unbonded sentinel's abilities. No sentinel would permit it."

"So you have the nerve to sit here and tell me how *I* should be bonded, but you shouldn't."

"It's not like that," Blair answered, quickly. "I've never found a compatible sentinel."

"Until now," Blair acknowledged, silently.

"So what do you think of this forced bonding thing? I imagine it would affect guides as well as sentinels."

"Of course; I am against it. Stone was trying to further his career and garner power with these suggestions."

Jim nodded and looked over the memo. "I think we might be looking for someone who knew Stone's agenda and was against it. Was Stone a guide?"

Blair understood the question. It was very unlikely that a sentinel would harm a guide, any guide. "No, he wasn't."

"Then it could have been a sentinel or a guide that killed him," Jim surmised.

Blair considered the idea and then nodded. "But all the sentinels and guides at the SGF knew what he was proposing. And they all knew Dr. Brennan wouldn't support it."

"But the chancellor would, so I'm betting Stone had some others supporting him," Jim finished.

"You're thinking there was some kind of splinter group, working with Stone? A radical group within the SGF that some sentinel would consider a threat?"

"Have you heard of one?" Jim asked.

"No, but I know who would be associated with such a group, if it existed," Blair answered, his hands fluttering nervously. He had heard rumors of a small but vocal group of guides in the SGF who wanted rights over sentinels, feeling they should have control since sentinels couldn't function as sentinels without guides. Blair had dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Still, he remembered the conversation he had with one SGF guide, Dennis Greene...

Dennis was one of the trainers at the SGF. He worked with guides, teaching them about sentinels' needs, and how to help sentinels use their senses for maximum effect. He and Blair had never really talked, except for a nod in passing, because the two worked different schedules. But Blair was at the SGF this day because two new sentinels had come online and Blair had been asked to test them. He was delivering the information when Dennis walked in.

"Dr. Sandburg," he greeted and held out his hand.

"You must be Dennis Greene," Blair answered with a smile. "Dr. Stone speaks very highly of you."

"Yes, Guide Dennis Greene," the young man agreed, enjoying the compliment. "Dr. Stone mentioned that you are one of the SGF's testers since you are unbonded."

Blair nodded. "I was just handing in the report on the new sentinels. One of them is in the medium range for all five senses, the other's only really heightened sense is hearing. His other senses are high end normal."

Dennis nodded as Blair handed Dr. Stone's secretary, April, the report. "I'm surprised you haven't bonded yet," Dennis stated as he handed in a report of his own.

"I haven't been lucky enough to find my sentinel." Blair forced a smile. "And your sentinel?" Blair asked.

"Oh, I let him go and get some lunch. Every once in a while you have to let sentinels off their leashes. Otherwise, they become difficult to handle," Dennis answered, arrogantly.

Blair tried to hide his shock at the statement. Dennis made the sentinel sound like a dog. "I should go; I have a class to teach." He waved to April.

Dennis nodded his understanding. "You really should consider getting a sentinel, Dr. Sandburg. They're very useful and make very good-" Blair has been sure Dennis was going to say 'pets' but the guide said "assistants" as his voice carried down the hall. Despite Dennis' choice of words, Blair was sure Dennis was thinking, 'pets.' Hours later, still angry at Dennis' words, Blair logged into the SGF database and discovered that Dennis was a low level guide. Probably the reason guides let him get near other sentinels - guides were notoriously territorial around their sentinels. Looking up Dennis' sentinel, Blair discovered the man was a low level sentinel, only his hearing really enhanced. Still, Blair had to feel some sympathy for any sentinel that bonded to Dennis...

"Dennis Greene, he's one of the guides at the SGF. He is arrogant and thinks guides should be in charge of their sentinels. He and Stone were close. If there were a group pushing for legislation that would give guides control of their sentinels, he'd be part of it. He's on the list I gave you."

Jim nodded. "He might be able to give us some insights as to who would threaten Stone," Jim stated, standing. "I'll start my interviews with him."

Blair rose as well. "I'm coming with you, man. If nothing else, I'll know the people Dennis Greene talks about."

Chapter 10

Dennis Greene looked up from his desk when Jim Ellison entered the room, Blair beside him. "Mr. Greene?" Jim asked, holding up his badge. "I'm Detective Ellison. I believe you know Dr. Sandburg." Jim indicated Blair. "We are investigating Dr. Stone's death and I'd like to ask you some questions."

Dennis Greene stood. It was no surprise that he was being interviewed. He imagined everyone who worked with Stone would be. "We could go to the lounge."

"That would be fine." Jim stepped back and Dennis led them to the SGF lounge.

As they took seats at one of the tables, Dennis glanced over Jim thoughtfully. "I really don't know much," he said. "I mean I wasn't part of Dr. Stone's personal staff."

Jim considered this. "Do you know of any threats against Dr. Stone?"

Dennis hesitated a moment and then, sighing, reached in his pocket and pulled out a folded paper. "This was in my mailbox this morning, no envelope, just folded." He handed the paper to Jim who picked it up by the edge.

The note read, "GET OUT OF THE SGF-GCG OR ELSE!"

Jim looked over at Dennis. "What is the SGF-GCG?"

Dennis looked embarrassed. "It is a group of guides who were pushing for legislation that would allow us more legal standing to support our sentinels better."

"What's the GCG stand for?" Jim asked.

"Guide Control Group. Dr. Stone came up with the idea."

"What does your sentinel think of this?" Blair asked, quietly.

"I never told him," Dennis answered and then glared at Blair, anger rising. "Why should I? He relies on me, not me on him. I should have some say in his life since I have to keep him functioning."

Blair opened his mouth to say something, but Jim rested a restraining hand on his arm. "We'll need the names of the members of this group. They may be targets."

"You think whoever killed Stone did it because of the GCG?"

"It is a possibility."

Dennis nodded. "I'll give you the names but I'm going to call the others and let them know what's going on."

"That will be fine," Jim agreed. "And you'll need to be vigilant and if you see anything odd you should call the PD immediately. I'll take this back to the PD and see if our forensics' people can get something off the paper." Jim reached in his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag, dropping the paper in.

"You should let your sentinel know about this. He'll notice something wrong long before you will," Blair suggested.

"I'd rather not. He'll go into blessed protector mode and I don't need him reverting back to a caveman. He's hard enough to keep on a leash as it is."

Again, Blair heard Dennis' voice ring with arrogance, and Blair cringed, thinking that Jim, a sentinel, shouldn't hear this trash. "Just because he's protective, doesn't mean he's not intelligent and-"

"Give me a break, Sandburg. Sentinels are instinct driven, that's the main reason they need guides and why we should have control over them."

"When can you have the list ready?" Jim cut in on the debate, his voice neutral, guessing Greene didn't know Jim's sentinel status and deciding to keep it that way.

"I'll have it for you in about half an hour," Dennis answered, as Jim stood.

"Come on Sandburg, I want to get a look at the mailroom."

Blair stood but looked down at Dennis, unable to leave without saying something. "If you were any kind of real guide, you wouldn't be spouting that trash. Guides protect their sentinels, not play some power game over them."

Dennis looked amused. "Says the unbonded guide," he stated, dismissively.

"Sandburg, come on," Jim called from the door before the argument could escalate. "Can you deliver that list to me in the mailroom?" Jim addressed Dennis.

Dennis nodded as Blair turned and stalked out of the room, following Jim. "Did you hear what he was saying?" he demanded, as Jim turned to him.

"I did," Jim answered, his voice clipped. "But you getting arrested for assault won't change his mind. Where's the mailroom?"

Blair closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His mother had always told him to let go of his anger and he muttered, "I'm letting this go," as he tried to follow her advice. He opened his eyes and looked at Jim, sensing serious anger in the sentinel. *So much for Dennis' claims about sentinels not having control.* "It's this way," he answered and headed down the hall, stopping at the last door on the right.

Walking in, Jim looked at a stack of cubbies with professors' and teaching assistants' names taped below each cubby. Going over, careful not to touch any of the mail, Jim glanced in each box. There were piles of papers stacked in some and nothing in others. "I don't want to touch this stuff without a warrant," Jim said, more to himself than to Blair. "But if there are other members of that guide group working for the SGF, I'd like to know if they got any threats and I'd want the papers before any evidence on them can be disturbed..."

Blair nodded his understanding. "As SGF personnel come in, I could ask if they've received any threats."

"Good," Jim answered, his eyes on the mailboxes.

Not many people were checking their mailboxes in the afternoon, most had come in earlier in the day, but Blair checked with everyone entering the SGF office, to see if they had received any threatening notes. A few of the SGF members stared at him in confusion, several let Jim retrieve their mail and hand it over after checking for threatening notes, and two admitted they had received notes earlier. Both had thrown the notes away.

Additionally, Dennis did deliver the list within half an hour, handing over twelve names. Jim scanned the list, Blair inching over to peer over Jim's arm. As Blair got a look at the list he muttered, "Damn." One of the members, Lisa Wilson, was a student in his advanced anthropology course on cultural practices. A bright young lady, articulate and insightful, Blair would never expect anything so unprincipled from her.

"Problem, Sandburg?" Jim asked.

"No, just someone I didn't expect to see on the list."

"A friend of yours?"

"No, just one of my students but I wouldn't have thought she would ever be a part of this."

Jim and Blair spent the rest of the afternoon tracking down members of the SGF-GCG group, meeting up with ten of the guides. With a few well-placed questions, Jim discovered that all of them had, to varying degrees, the same attitude as Dennis Greene. They still had Lisa Wilson and Mark Klock to speak with by

the end of the day, but everyone they spoke with had received the note, several having dismissed it as a joke.

Chapter 11

Simon was speaking with Rhonda when Jim walked into the office late that afternoon, Blair beside him. Glancing over, he watched as Blair talked, his hands flying in emphasis. Jim seemed oblivious of the emotional level of the conversation and the only sign that he was listening was a few grunted responses.

Putting his jacket on the back of his chair, Jim turned and nodded to Simon before walking over. "Anything to report?" Simon asked.

Jim nodded, his face grim, and Simon indicated they should go into the office. Blair, deciding he had been part of the investigation and should be part of the debriefing, followed them in, uninvited. When neither man objected, he took a seat before Simon's desk.

"Okay, Jim, what have you found?"

"Dr. Stone headed up a SGF splinter group that is trying to get guides legal rights and control over sentinels. Everyone we spoke with from that group received death threats."

"What do you mean legal rights and control?" Simon asked, turning with a glare to Blair.

"I wasn't part of that group, man." Blair held up his hands. "I didn't know anything about it until today."

"It is

a small group of arrogant guides," Jim continued as if neither man had spoken, "that feel they should have legal guardianship over sentinels and that sentinels should be kept on a leash and treated like their pets."

"Dennis Greene was the only one that said that," Blair objected and then swallowed when Jim turned to him.

"Do you think anyone in that group thought differently?" Jim challenged, and then turned back to Simon, not waiting for an answer. "Stone was making a power play and a name for himself by starting up this group and he was going to meet with Senator Burns about legislation."

"So you think someone who objected might have murdered Stone?"

"Sentinels would not be happy with having their rights taken away."

"And a lot of guides would do anything to protect their sentinels," Blair added, quietly.

Simon took off his glasses and pinched his nose. "This sounds like it's going to get real messy-" he glanced over at Jim- "and very political. I'll talk with the Chief; let him know what's going on."

Jim nodded, rising. "I'll go write up my notes before heading home." He started for the door, Blair following.

Simon nodded, his eyes on Blair. "Dr. Sandburg, I'd like a word with you." Blair turned back and resumed his seat as Jim walked out. "What were the chances of Stone succeeding?"

"I doubt anything would come of his efforts." Blair shook his head. "Dr. Brennan and most of the SGF think him, thought him, a crackpot."

"But," Simon prompted, watching him.

Blair opened his mouth, then sighed and looked down. When he looked back up at Simon, he shook his head again. "Dr. Stone was beginning to have a bit of a following. I didn't realize it until this assignment. He was starting to push his agenda in a very organized way. People who should know better were starting to listen to him and Chancellor Edwards and Senator Burns were part of that organization. I'll admit it was starting to be dangerous."

"I see." Simon glanced out the office window at Jim. "A hundred and fifty years ago slavery was abolished in this country. It seems as if the SGF is trying to bring it back."

"Not the SGF," Blair answered, softly. "Just a few people who think guiding a sentinel is about controlling them, and that's because they are not real guides."

"I hope you are right," Simon answered, "because if we are going backwards, then we'll lose our sentinels and guides. People like Jim won't stay in this country."

"It will never happen," Blair answered, rising. "Someone would stop Dr. Stone."

"Someone did," Simon pointed out as Blair opened the door and stepped out of the office heading towards Jim.

Blair wanted to help Jim type up his notes, but Jim waved him away. And after a few moments, Blair realized that since they weren't working on the case, Jim had turned back into a stone wall. He really hadn't gotten much out of Jim during the day, certainly nothing personal, but he had hoped Jim might be more approachable. "If you don't need me-" Blair said, standing before Jim's desk.

Jim had glanced up at him. "Thanks for your help. I have called Dr. Stone's sister - she lives about an hour north of Cascade and I'll ride out to see her tomorrow. And I'll interview Mark Klock and Lisa Wilson tomorrow. Hopefully forensics will get something off the notes or something in Stone's office. I'll also make an appointment with Senator Burns."

"I have to teach a class tomorrow morning, but I could help in the afternoon."

Jim could hear the sincerity in Blair's voice and he had been about to give a nasty retort about not wanting or needing help. Instead, he softened his voice as he answered, "That's unnecessary. Believe me; I know how to interrogate people. Take care of your commitments."

Blair nodded, looking down at Jim for another moment, and then walked over to his assigned desk, taking a seat, and watching as Jim glanced over his notes and began to type.

Thinking over the interviews that they had done, Blair realized this small group was undermining the entire sentinel guide relationship. If sentinels and guides couldn't trust each other and know they were there to support each other than there could be no relationship. Deciding he would look into the GCG guides' abilities, he packed his stuff. Dennis Greene was a low level guide and a poor companion to a sentinel. No high end sentinel would ever have chosen Dennis; he couldn't really support a sentinel with abilities like Jim's. Blair was guessing the other 'guides' were also low level, maybe with nearly non-existent empathy. During the interviews Blair had learned that only two of these *so called guides* even had sentinels, Dennis and Eddie Rugges, and Eddie Rugges shared Dennis' arrogant beliefs about sentinels. Suspecting this might be a case of sour grapes because of their limited abilities and their inability to get sentinels – especially high level ones- Blair wondered how they had ever been granted guide status. Not only was empathy testing done, but psychological testing was done, so how did any of them pass? It was another area Blair wanted to look at but the only place he could get that information was at the SGF office. Their databases were a closed system and could only be accessed at the SGF offices by SGF personnel.

Slinging his pack over his shoulder, Blair walked over to Jim's desk. "If you don't need me, I'm going to head over to the SGF office. I want to look up the GCG guides and see what their guide ratings are."

"Why?" Jim asked sitting back, looking over Blair.

"I don't think they have high ratings and shouldn't have been given guide status."

Jim looked away for a moment and nodded his understanding. And for the umpteenth time, Blair wondered what had happened between Jim and Brad Ventriss.

"And I want to get a look at who gave them accrediting."

"You're thinking there might be something behind their status."

"I don't know," Blair answered, honestly.

"Well, be careful, Sandburg. If this is an organized thing, there might be some unsavory people behind it."

Blair nodded. He had been about to point out that nothing would happen to him at the SGF office but reconsidered saying anything when he remembered Dr. Stone's body was found in the SGF office. "I'll be discreet."

"Let me know if you find anything," Jim answered, watching Blair turn to the door. Turning back to his work, Jim opened the drawer to grab a pen and noted the giant bottle of aspirin he kept there. It was only when he looked at the bottle that Jim realized he hadn't had a headache in two days. With his senses tamped down, every night he went home with a headache, sometimes with a migraine that made him nauseous. Not a fool, Jim understood the implications, his eyes automatically going to the door where Blair had been just minutes before.

Chapter 12

An hour later, Blair signed into the SGF computer bank and took a cubicle, inputting his information and password to enter the system. He had copied the names of the guides in the GCG and pulling the list out began searching the database.

As he suspected, every one of the guides was low functioning. What he found disturbing was that they had all been nominated and accredited by Dr. Stone. Looking at the printouts, Blair was sure Dr. Stone had known that not one of them was truly guide material.

Unfortunately, Blair did not have high enough access to look at their psychological testing. Dr. Brennan would, but he was in Boston. So who else might? Blair rubbed a hand over his face, feeling the stubble of five o'clock shadow as he considered the issue and went down the list of personnel with access: Dr. Brennan, Dr. Stone, Dr. Dorn – she did the actual testing and assessment, but she'd never give out information, she'd consider it a breach of doctor patient confidentiality – and Dr. Hayes, the head of guide training.

Thinking over the list, Blair smiled. Dr. Hayes was awful with computers and usually let his secretary take care of inputting anything, so Margaret would have access codes. There was no doubt that Margaret was discreet; as far as Blair knew, she had never given out any information about any sentinel or guide. So, it seemed unlikely that she would give Blair the access codes, but she might be willing to look up the information, if Blair explained why.

Logging out of the system Blair headed over to Dr. Hayes' office, hoping Hayes wouldn't be there and Margaret would. Walking in and seeing the secretary on the phone, he waved and took a seat.

"Hi, Blair." The pretty redhead smiled, as soon as she was off the phone. "Dr. Hayes is doing orientation for a bunch of guides, he won't be back today."

Blair stood and walked over, giving Margaret his best smile. "Actually, I came to see you."

"Does it have something to do with Dr. Stone?"

"How did you-"

"It is all over the office that you're working the case with a detective. Why are you working with the Police?"

"I'm representing the SGF at the central PD office and since I know the SGF, the detectives asked if I would go with them to look over the scene," Blair answered, mindful not to mention that Jim was a sentinel. He'd made that mistake once; he wasn't going to do it again.

"I guess that makes sense," she smiled. "So what do you need from me?"

One of the things Blair liked about Margaret was she didn't beat around the bush. A low level guide, she'd never tried to work with a sentinel, but she did put her guide skills to good use when talking with people. It made it possible for her to get a good read on people. "I need some information on twelve guides."

"You have access to the database and their guide scores."

"But not their psych evals."

"Why would you need that?" she asked, cautiously.

Blair sighed. "There's a splinter group of the SGF and we, that is, the detective in charge, Jim Ellison, thinks they may be targets."

"Again, I don't see why you would need their psych evals."

"The splinter groups' attitudes might be the motive for Dr. Stone's murder. They've all received threats. We're keeping it under wraps," he added, "but this would help in the investigation."

Margaret blinked, for a moment saying nothing, studying Blair as he shifted nervously in front of her. Blair knew he was asking her to break the rules and he wondered if she would agree to give him the information. After a moment, she nodded. "What exactly do you need?" she asked, her fingers moving to the computer keyboard.

Blair handed her the names. "Just whether or not they were willing to compromise and collaborate with others and whether Dr. Hayes recommended them."

"They wouldn't be guides if they couldn't work with others," Margaret answered, as she typed the first name. Blair couldn't see what was on her screen but he could see her frown as she typed another name and then another, her frown turning to quiet curses as she continued down the list. Finally, she looked up at him. "Only one of them scored within an acceptable range for working with others, Lisa Wilson. And she wasn't recommended for guide services because her abilities were so low."

Blair nodded, not surprised by the results. "Margaret, you can't tell anyone about this. It's part of an investigation."

"But surely I should let Dr. Hayes and Dr. Dorn know."

"Please don't. For the time being, we need to keep quiet if we're going to finish this investigation and find Dr. Stone's killer. I'll let them know when we have a handle on the situation."

Margaret considered Blair's words and Blair realized she wasn't taking his request lightly. Finally, she nodded. "It's between us," she agreed. "But I still don't see how they became guides if Dr. Dorn and Dr. Hayes didn't recommend them. Dr. Stone-" Margaret paused as she considered the implications. "Why would he want guides who couldn't support sentinels?" she finished, in a near whisper.

"That's what I'm going to find out," Blair answered just as quietly before turning to the door. There was still one other information source he needed to check out. Settling his backpack squarely on his shoulder, he headed for the political science department. Jack Kelso was an adjunct there, teaching a course in foreign affairs. Kelso, a former CIA operative, had incredible contacts and was brilliant when it came to covert research.

Knocking on his door, Blair opened it and smiled. "Hi, Jack, have you got a minute?"

"Blair." Jack looked up from some papers and hastily covered them, moving away from his computer. "Come in," he waved and indicated a chair by his desk. Moving his wheelchair, Jack rolled close and put out his hand to shake. Jack had taken a bullet during his career and was now wheelchair bound. It had ended his career in the field, but not his abilities to think as an operative or covert analyst and Blair knew for a fact that Jack was still very dangerous.

Blair shook the offered hand and took a seat.

"What brings you to the poly sci building?" Jack asked.

"I need some information," Blair admitted. "I need to get it discreetly."

Holding up a hand, Jack turned and switched on a white noise generator. "Does this have to do with Dr. Stone's murder?"

"Yes."

"And exactly how did you get involved?"

Blair sighed, "It's a long story."

"Then I suggest you get started." Jack grabbed a yellow legal pad as Blair started with his assignment to Major Crimes.

"...and so I discovered that none of these so called guides has any real guide abilities, not one was recommended as a guide, and only one passed the psych eval." Blair finished and looked over at Jack Kelso.

"What conclusions did you draw?" Jack asked.

"That someone is trying to undermine sentinel guide relations in a way that will harm sentinels and is trying to create justification for limiting sentinels', and by extension, guides' rights. I can't tell you why, but it feels organized, as if someone is orchestrating this."

Jack nodded as he glanced at the notes he had written. "Your theory seems plausible. I would guess that someone wants control of the group. I'll make some discreet inquiries and see what I come up with. In the meantime, I would keep this very quiet. You don't want to show your hand."

"What does Detective," Kelso glanced down at his notes, "Ellison think of your theory?"

"I haven't really shared the idea that I think this is an organized effort, but I think he feels the same way. He doesn't broadcast it, but he's an unbonded sentinel and Stone had made some notes about using him as an example of why the SGF should control bonding. Stone was considering deliberately messing with Jim's senses to push the agenda."

"I see," Kelso answered.

Blair nodded, rising. "Thanks." He turned to the door.

“Blair,” Kelso called and Blair turned. “You’re an unbonded guide, is there a chance?” Kelso didn’t finish but waved his hand.

Blair bit his lip, debating whether or not to talk about Jim, but decided to give just the bare facts. If Jack found out anything, it wouldn’t be because he was asked to look into it. Blair knew he was splitting hairs but he could honestly say he didn’t ask for information. “Jim is against bonding. There was some kind of incident when he first came online. His father tried to treat sentinel guide bonding like a corporate merge and the guide he was paired with shouldn’t have been certified. The guide was later removed from the registry.

“There was a time when I would have thought that someone unqualified receiving certification was a mistake, but after this, I’m not so sure. I wonder if there are any other guides out there with certification because they came from money and whether or not some poor sentinel has to deal with it. After this investigation is through, the SGF will have to go back and look over their files. We’re going to need a thorough investigation of sentinels and guides.”

Kelso considered this. “What was the alleged guide’s name?”

“Brad Ventriss.”

“Norman Ventriss’ son?” Kelso asked, and Blair nodded. “I would imagine Ventriss was not too happy with his son losing certification”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Kelso considered this. “I’ll call you if I find anything.”

Chapter 13

Jim typed up his notes and then walked over to Simon’s door and knocked. When he heard Simon call, “Come in, Jim,” he entered and took a seat, his face grim.

“I put my notes in your inbox. When you look over the notes, you are going to find that Stone was planning on using my unbonded status as some kind of test case. Sandburg was put here because he advocates bonding.”

“Did Dr. Sandburg know what was going on?”

“I’m pretty sure he didn’t. He was as upset by the memo as I was.”

“I spoke with the commissioner and let him know what was going on. He’d like to keep this investigation quiet. I assured him that as long as you are running the investigation, it will be. I’m guessing Dr. Sandburg will want to keep this quiet.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jim nodded. “I’ll talk to him about it, just to be sure.”

“Good.” Simon sighed as he considered his detective.

"The SGF really did a job of screwing you, didn't it?"

Jim nodded. "I think the SGF and my father both. I bet there was some kind of agreement between my old man and Stone about this bonding thing. I can almost guarantee that I wouldn't be considered for some kind of test case about bonding if William Ellison of Ellison Enterprises wasn't my father."

"You don't think your father would be involved in the murder?"

"No," Jim shook his head. "My father solves things with money, not murder. But I'm not the only unbonded sentinel out there. Why me? I would bet if the SGF had a hand in bonding, my guide would already be picked by Stone and my father."

"But if you refused-"

"There are ways to get around a sentinel's senses. There are drugs that will ensure bonding. They were used on me when I came online to get me to bond with Ventriss. Fortunately, the guide wasn't strong enough for a solid bond."

"Shit, I didn't realize that they drugged you."

"It is not something the SGF advertises," Jim admitted.

"And you think your father is planning on having you bond with someone of his choice, *again*?"

Jim sat back, considering the question. "My father would learn from his mistakes. I don't know if he spoke with Stone but if he did, and I was forced into a bond, my father would have a hand in it and would be sure the guide was strong enough to hold a bond. And it would be a guide of his choosing. Make no mistake; Ellison Enterprises has pull. It is a major supporter of Rainier and the SGF."

"Are you going to ask your father about this?"

"I haven't spoken with him since the bonding mess two years ago. So I don't see any reason to now unless he comes up in the investigation. Stone's dead, so is his bonding agenda."

Simon shook his head. As a father, he wanted what was best for his son but he would never force something on his son, especially something like bonding – a lifetime commitment where someone else helps you control your senses. It was as intimate a relationship as any with a lover. Simon couldn't imagine a father doing this. "I'm sorry," he offered. "You know that old saying; it is true, you can choose your friends but not your relatives."

Jim nodded. He didn't need sympathy; he had survived what was done to him, but once in a while, he needed a friend to act as a sounding board. Usually, that was Simon. "Sandburg is an unbonded guide," he stated, softly. "I have noticed when he's around I don't get headaches and my senses are sharper."

"Are you thinking about bonding?" Simon asked, surprised. Secretly, he was pleased with the idea. He hated seeing Jim fight headaches and leave exhausted after a day's work because he had spent the day repressing his natural abilities.

"I don't know anything about Sandburg, so I'm not thinking about anything. I don't even know if he'd be interested." Jim paused. "But..."

"But?"

"But I don't know. After Ventriss, I swore I would never take a guide. I could live with the headaches, with keeping the senses down but, maybe I'm having second thoughts."

"Ventriss, your father, and the SGF were manipulative and wanted to use bonding for their own purposes, but sentinels and guides have been bonding throughout time. This might be a good thing, Jim. Don't just push it away. Take your time with it and see if it is what you want."

"I'll think about it." Jim paused and smiled. "And I might run a check on Dr. Sandburg, just in case."

Simon glanced at Jim with a matching smile. "I didn't hear that." He paused and then added more soberly, "Think about what's best for you. Don't just shut someone out because of what the SGF and your father did. Don't let them control your actions that way," Simon advised. "Whether or not Sandburg is the right guide for you, give yourself the option of having one."

Jim sighed. He knew he was something of a loner and was never really thrilled with the idea of sharing his senses with a guide but he was tired of the headaches and the way his senses controlled him. Thinking he would prefer the headaches to a guide like Dennis Greene, he acknowledged that Blair was nothing like Greene. "It is a big commitment but I might consider it. Good night, Sir." Jim stood.

Grabbing his jacket, Jim headed for the door. As he walked out, Megan was coming in. "Hey, Jimbo," she smiled a greeting. "Are you heading out, mate?" she asked, eyeing his jacket. "Brown, Rafe, Taggart and I are heading over to Donovan's for a pint. Care to join us?"

Usually, Jim said no, not because he was averse to the company, but usually he had a headache by the end of the day. "Why not?" he agreed, and watched Megan's face light up.

"Great, give me a minute and I'll head over with you." She quickly dropped some things on her desk, putting a file in her drawer, before coming back, pink dingo coat in hand.

The pair took the elevator down and, leaving their cars, walked the two blocks to Donovan's Pub. Joel Taggart, H and Rafe were already there and had commandeered a round table that could easily seat six. Seeing Jim beside Megan, they quickly pulled over a fifth chair. "Hey, Jim," Taggart smiled. "Glad you could join us."

"Thanks Joel." Jim took a seat between Joel and Rafe.

"No headache today?" Connor asked.

"No, no headache." Connor looked over at him, and Jim could tell she was wondering if the headaches were senses related but the conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a large pitcher of beer and five frosty mugs.

"How's the investigation going?" H asked.

"I don't know who killed Stone, but I have got a motive."

"That usually helps narrow the suspects," Rafe said.

"It might make the suspect list larger in this case," Jim admitted. "Tomorrow I'm interviewing two of Stone's colleagues, as well as his sister and Senator Burns."

"Is Sandy going with you?" Megan asked. "I noticed he's working the case with you."

"The Captain thinks he might have some insight since he's at Rainier and part of the SGF. Tomorrow he's there in the morning, so I'm on my own."

"Is he okay?" Rafe asked, quietly. When the group realized Blair hadn't been there as a spy, they had been a bit more open but still not sure what to make of him. Especially after they found out Jim was a sentinel.

Jim took a moment to consider the question, realizing the group was waiting on his seal of approval.

"He's okay."

"Is he here to find you a guide?" Megan asked.

"Not really. He's here for the reason he said, to support sentinels and guides in the PD. But the people who sent him might have other motives."

The detectives nodded as Joel shook his head. "The SGF is causing trouble, isn't it? I have friends in the fire department and they say the SGF is trying to take control of sentinels and guides there."

"I heard it too," H agreed. "I think a couple of the fire houses booted the reps out."

"With good reason," Joel continued, his eyes on Jim. Joel had been with Major Crimes a long time and had been there when Jim came online. He had seen Jim's treatment by the SGF and his 'supposed' guide. As a result, Joel didn't trust the SGF.

Jim, seeing Joel's gaze, nodded. "I think Stone's death might have put the brakes on for some of those plans but Sandburg wasn't involved in them."

Joel nodded, accepting Jim's assessment.

"Jim, how long have you been an active sentinel?" H asked.

"I came online about two years ago."

"Man, you should have told us. We could have found you a guide."

"Thanks, but no thanks, H. If I want a guide, I'll find one myself."

Rafe chuckled, as H shook his head before continuing. "We're always tied with homicide for success rate. If you found a guide, your solve rate would go through the roof, not that it's not high already," H held up his hands, placatingly. "We could beat homicide this year. I personally, would like a bottle of Scotch, courtesy of homicide."

"They might say we have an unfair advantage, mate," Megan pointed out.

"I'll find a way around that," H answered.

Jim shook his head. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here." He picked up his beer, downing some.

"How are things doing with your cases?" Joel asked, turning to Rafe and H.

Jim relaxed as the conversation drifted to other topics, the five detectives relaxing and enjoying each other's company.

They spent an hour and a half eating peanuts and nursing their beers before breaking up. No one had had too much to drink and when the small group broke up, Jim headed to his truck. It had been a while since he had enjoyed the company of friends and he felt pretty relaxed as he headed home. He stopped to pick up some groceries and was just getting in the door when his phone rang.

Putting down the packages, he answered, "Ellison."

"Hi, Jim, it's Blair, uhm Blair Sandburg."

"Sandburg, is everything all right?"

"Yeah, listen, I checked on the guides in the GCG. None of them should have received guide certification. They all received negative evals. So, I talked to a friend of mine, Jack Kelso, and asked him to look into this."

"The CIA whistle blower?"

"Yeah, he called a few minutes ago and asked me to meet him at his home. He suggested you might want to come with me."

"Give me your address and I'll pick you up," Jim answered, balancing the phone on his shoulder as he grabbed a paper and pen. Not bothering to empty the grocery bags, Jim stuffed them all in the refrigerator and headed out the door to get Sandburg.

Chapter 14

Jim grumbled as he pulled up in front of a converted warehouse that Blair gave as his address. "This place is a dump," he assessed, looking around. "And he'd be safer living in Starkville Prison." Getting out of the truck, he walked over to the door and pushed the buzzer. After a moment, Blair's voice crackled over the intercom.

"Hello, Jim?"

"Yeah, Sandburg, it's me."

"Come on in." The buzzer sounded and Jim pushed open the door as Blair came over. Walking in, Jim glanced around. The room was large and chilly with stacked pallets dividing the room into areas. On

one side of the room, there was a couch, a television and some decorative wall hangings and Jim could see a set of pallets defining a kitchen area. Considering what it was; Blair had tried to make it habitable. But the fact that he was wearing gloves inside suggested there were limits to what could be done with the space.

As his eyes scanned the dark room, he heard the snap of a trap and turned to Sandburg. "Is that a mouse trap?"

"On no, mice are small and cute but these..." Blair widened his hands while shaking his head, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"How can you live like this?"

"Man, it's expensive getting a doctorate. I'm still paying back student loans and where else can I get ten thousand square feet for eight fifty a month."

Jim didn't answer but turned to the door. "You ready?"

"Yeah," Blair grabbed his coat as Jim cocked his head to the side. He could hear arguing next door. He wondered what kind of noisy neighbors Blair had, but shrugged it off and turned leading Blair to his truck.

Jim and Blair drove to Jack Kelso's house and, parking outside, knocked on the door. Kelso answered the door and after Blair had introduced Jim, Kelso led them to his office where he indicated they should sit while he turned on an expensive, high end white noise generator.

Nodding once the generator was on Jack Kelso rolled his wheelchair over to his desk and looked at the two men. "Detective Ellison, Blair gave me information about the SGF and the recent accreditation of guides." Jim nodded. "Additionally, some of the guides have specific agendas with regard to sentinels."

Blair watching Jim, noted a muscle in his jaw jump, but Jim said nothing. "I made some discreet inquiries, in particular looking for who might be connected with Dr. Stone and Senator Burns. Many names came up, but one in particular raised a red flag." Lifting a folder he opened it and pushed it before the two men.

Jim looked down into the youthful and handsome face of man close in age to himself.

"This is Lee Brackett. He's an independent agent sometimes employed by the CIA. They recruited him right out of Yale and he's known for his complex game plans. He's brilliant, ruthless and amoral. He's also connected to Dr. Stone and CIA sentinel guide training. I think he was contracted to design a plan that could be used to subvert sentinel liberties, probably for the sub group of SGF led by Stone. The MO reeks of him, and truthfully, the CIA would be interested in such a plan, if it worked. If they could control sentinels..." He shook his head, not finishing the statement.

"Could he have gotten into an argument with Dr. Stone and killed him?" Blair asked.

"He is more than capable, he's been suspected of the murder of an operative in South America, but I know for a fact he is in South America this week. So, though he may have created the extremist group's

plans, he couldn't have committed the murder. But getting Brackett to come up with a plan can only mean one thing, the plan must have had some powerful backers."

"You mean like our Senator Burns."

"Yes," Kelso agreed. "And the CIA. And there's something else, Detective." Jack slid the picture back into the folder and handed the entire file to Jim. "Aside from Senator Burns, Chancellor Edwards and Dr. Stone, I believe your father was active in this plan. It seems he has been meeting with Senator Burns and Dr. Stone."

Blair gasped, turning to Jim, but realized, as did Jack, that this was something Jim had already suspected. Jim simply nodded his understanding, showing no surprise. He sighed and glanced down at the folder, giving himself a minute to reorder his thoughts. He noticed he was crushing the folder and deliberately loosened his hold before looking up, his face reflecting no emotion. "Can you give us a list of members who might be involved in the SGF sub group?" he asked, in a flat voice.

"I have Blair's list," Kelso answered. "I can see if any other names come up."

"I would appreciate that," Jim answered, rising. Blair followed suit and Kelso let them out.

Walking to the truck, and sensing Jim's anger and, underneath that, hurt, Blair wanted to say something to make Jim feel better but he couldn't think of anything that could possibly help with this level of betrayal. "I'm sorry," he whispered, at last.

Jim just shrugged in answer and took a deep breath before starting the engine. He could feel a headache forming behind his eyes, and hoping to forestall a migraine reached across to the glove compartment pulling out a bottle of aspirin.

"Can I do anything to help?"

Jim shook his head and dry swallowed two pills before pulling out of the parking space and heading back towards Blair's warehouse. Really, what could anyone do to help? Jim knew his father was a manipulative bastard. Jim figured his father had given up after Ventriss. They hadn't spoken but a few polite words at family events in two years but he could see his old man's plan. Require that all sentinels bond, have the SGF pick the guides – his father would make sure he had some say in that – William Ellison would pick a guide he could control, and Jim would be left at cross purposes with his guide and his father. And William would learn from his mistakes, this guide would not be a Brad Ventriss with no guiding ability.

Taking another breath, Jim deliberately loosened his grip on his steering wheel. He had Sandburg with him so he needed to put this aside, for now. He would think about what to do with his father after he dropped off Sandburg. Jim wasn't going to rush blindly into things and he wasn't going to race to his father's door and confront him. He would treat his relationship with his father the way he did a crime. He would gather evidence before confronting his old man. Deciding on this, he swung the truck down towards the dock.

A block from Blair's warehouse, Jim saw the flashing lights of fire engines and slowed to a stop, parking as close to the warehouse as he could, and jogged down the street, Blair beside him. The scene that met their eyes as they reached the warehouse made Blair gasp in horror.

There were fire engines and police cars around the warehouse and fire inspectors were entering and exiting the building. And there was no missing the sharp smell of smoke and fire. Blair gasped, shock settling in as he started forward, but Jim grabbed his arm. "Wait Chief," he said softly. "You can't go in there until it is safe."

Blair nodded numbly, and Jim turned, still holding Blair's arm, and walked over to Joel Taggart.

"Joel?" Jim asked. "What's going on?"

Joel stepped away from the fire inspector. "There was a drug lab here. It blew up tonight. My squad was sent out because of the bomb. What brought you here?"

Jim nodded to Blair, who was staring at the warehouse. "Sandburg lives in there."

Joel blinked in surprise and then shook his head. "There was an apartment but the lab blew out the wall." He glanced at Blair. "There might be a few things salvageable but there's no way you're going to be able to stay there."

Jim glanced at Sandburg. "If it's okay to go in, I'll help him pack what can be saved."

"Yeah, just be careful." Jim nodded and gently led Blair into the warehouse, waving away the fire inspectors.

Blair glanced around at the wet and burned furniture before moving mechanically towards the coffee table. His computer was there and he picked it up, wincing when water poured off it. He knew it was trashed but he hoped he could pull and salvage the hard drive. Moving over to a cabinet, he pulled out a small photo album and a guitar case, his hand running over the guitar case with loving care before handing them to Jim and entering his bedroom area where he grabbed his suitcase. He had clothes in a beat up dresser and though he wrinkled his nose at the smell of smoke, he hoped they could be cleaned. Finally, he glanced at the walls and carefully lifted down three wooden face masks, wiping them down with a towel. He was silent through the packing, aware that Jim was watching him. He didn't want to break down in front of the detective.

Gathering the things, he walked out of his home and looked around. His car was next to the building and he noted with relief it was still intact, if stuck behind the emergency vehicles. He supposed he could sneak in and stay at his office tonight and he could lock up what was left of his things in his car.

As he turned, Jim appeared beside him, still holding the album and guitar case. "Sandburg, where are you going to stay tonight?" Jim asked and Blair could hear concern in Jim's voice.

Blair opened his mouth but nothing came out for a moment as he considered who he could stay with. He had a bunch of friends (none would turn him away, but none were particularly close friends) and he might get a couch for a night or two but he would have to scramble to find a bed tonight. He turned and looked at his car and then back at Jim. "I'll stay in my office."

Jim glanced at Blair's stuff and then back at Blair. He didn't know if it was some sentinel instinct because Blair was a guide but he couldn't let Blair, who was now virtually homeless, stay in his office. "I have a spare room; it is small but you can stay there until you get back on your feet."

"Are you sure?" Blair asked, relief evident in his voice.

"Yeah, come on. You won't be able to get your car out tonight. We'll get it tomorrow." Jim carried some of Blair's things to his truck and Blair followed holding the suitcases. Signaling Blair to get in, Jim turned the truck and headed home.

Chapter 15

Jim and Blair carried Blair's things up to Jim's apartment and Jim showed Blair the small guest room. Blair smiled when he saw it and quietly thanked Jim as he put his things down. It wasn't a particularly large room, but it was warm, rodent free, and Blair had to face facts, he didn't have a lot of stuff anymore. Blair shied away from that thought as he gently placed his guitar case in the corner.

"I'll get you some clean sheets and blankets," Jim looked at the small room. "In the morning I'll show you the laundry room. You can try washing your clothes." Jim disappeared, returning with some sheets, pillows, blankets and a pair of sweats. "You might be comfortable in these," he handed over the clothes.

"Thanks again, Jim."

Jim turned to leave but then turned back, knowing how devastated Blair would be. "If there's anything else..."

Blair shook his head. He couldn't think. He'd need a little time to process events. Pushing his hand nervously through his hair, he looked at Jim, "I'll meditate for a while."

"Good, I'll make us something to eat," Jim started to leave the room, but hesitantly turned back. "Chief, you're here. Everything else is just stuff. What's important is you're safe."

Blair nodded his agreement. "I lost a few text books, nothing I can't replace. My most valuable book is at my office. It's Burton's *The Sentinels of Paraguay*. The other important things are mostly salvaged: the guitar, the photo album and the three masks I got from tribal leaders on expeditions. I'll have to see if I can get anything off the hard drive of my laptop, it's trashed." He closed his eyes a minute, feeling exhausted after the emotional events.

"Why don't you just rest, never mind meditating, while I make us some dinner?" Jim turned to the door. "There's a cordless phone in the living room if there's anyone you need to call."

"Thanks, I'll...I just need to sit for a few minutes and get my head around what's happened and then I'll make some calls." He looked at Jim's retreating figure. "Thanks, Jim."

Jim nodded and closed the French doors that led to the guest room.

Taking hold of the sheets, Blair made the bed, mostly to have something to do. Then he sat down. The truth of the matter was he hadn't lost that much. You'd have to have a lot to lose a lot. Blair was used to expeditions and traveling, so he didn't have too much. The things he cared about the most, had survived. Except, maybe his computer. Grimacing at that idea, he leaned back resting his head on the pillow and staring up at the ceiling. Jim had said, 'never mind meditating,' obviously, Jim didn't realize that guides meditated and insisted their sentinels meditate as well. It was the best way to reduce the stress of over stimulated senses. There was a lot Jim didn't know about being a sentinel, not that Blair faulted Jim for his lack of knowledge. Blair laid the blame on the SGF for mishandling things when Jim came online. But Blair was here now and even if Jim didn't want to bond, Blair could show him some things to help him with his senses. Blair couldn't imagine how difficult it could be to go around with his senses suppressed.

Closing his eyes, Blair began breathing slowly, letting the tension ease out of his body. Almost unconsciously, he kept a slow count of his breathing, as he willed his limbs to relax. Finally, some of the anger and emotional pain ebbed and he got up and moved into the living room. The short relaxation technique had done the trick and he walked into the kitchen and glanced at Jim. "Can I help?"

"Pretty much everything is done, but help yourself to a beer," Jim poured some soup into two bowls and brought the bowls to the table. Turning back he pulled a large omelet from the oven and divided it in half, placing it on two plates before coming over and taking a seat. "I made cheese omelets and some chicken soup I had in the freezer."

"Thanks, this is great," Blair smiled, digging in. He hadn't eaten since breakfast and didn't realize just how hungry he was.

Jim nodded and focused on his own food. "I'm sorry if it is a bit bland but..."

"But you're a sentinel even if you repress your senses." Blair paused, debating whether to push forward. Finally, he glanced up. "If you had a guide-"

"Don't go any further with that thought," Jim interrupted, brandishing a spoon at Blair. "I'm surviving without one."

"Yes, you're surviving, but you're not at your best. You should be doing more than surviving."

"I had a guide; it didn't work out."

"Did you have a guide or someone pretending to be a guide?" Blair asked, softly.

Jim dropped his spoon and looked over at Blair. He knew Sandburg was trying to help and, being honest, he admitted he felt better around Blair. His senses didn't feel like so much of a burden near the guide and his headache disappeared, but he didn't know enough about Blair to consider bonding and he didn't even know if Blair would want to bond.

Annoyance in his voice, Jim answered, "I had the guide the SGF gave me."

"And I bet Dr. Stone picked him," Blair challenged, thinking Jim's father probably had a hand in the choice as well. But Blair didn't want to say that.

Jim seemed to hear him anyway. "Yeah, he did, with the help of my father." Jim hesitated and then added, "My father wanted me to go into the family business. I refused. I guess he figured with Ventriss as a guide, I'd end up in the family business. Ventriss didn't want to work with the PD."

"Bonding is not a corporate process," Blair answered, angrily. "What happened?"

Jim pushed his bowl away, his appetite gone, and glanced at Blair. "Ventriss kept messing with my senses out in the field and explaining it away by saying he was still learning how to help me. Thinking back on it, I'm lucky I didn't get killed with him by my side. He accidentally doused me with pepper spray one day." Jim paused as Blair gaped at him in horror. Jim could remember the angrily welts all over his arms and Ventriss standing beside him holding a can of mace, muttering over and over, "Sorry, I didn't know I'd sprayed it, I have it to protect you." He had ended up in the hospital where the doctors had immediately covered his arms in medications and started some kind of antihistamine drip. Shrugging, he continued. "Another day he blew a dog whistle near me to get my attention while we were on a stakeout. That caused a serious spike. I almost ended up in the hospital for that one. He said he wanted to get my attention quietly and didn't know it would make me spike. There were other incidents. I think he figured I'd be tossed out of the PD because my senses were not controllable but I was put on desk duty while I worked through the problems.

"I actually was making some headway, mostly suppressing my senses, so Ventriss came to the station and deliberately messed with my senses there."

Jim stopped. He could remember it clearly, not that he would repeat it. He had gone to the men's room and Ventriss had followed him. He had started to use the urinal when Ventriss sprayed something in the air. Jim tried to sniff at the air and figure what it was. The next thing Jim knew, Simon was pulling him from a zone.

Later, Jim found out that Ventriss had gone into the bullpen laughing and telling people to go to the bathroom and check out the zoned sentinel holding his dick and take a camera. Fortunately, Joel Taggart and Simon's secretary, Rhonda, were in the bullpen and heard Ventriss. While Joel kept would be voyeurs and photographers out of the bathroom, Rhonda got Simon. Simon came running at Rhonda's explanation and shook Jim to bring him out of the zone while Taggart, none too gently, escorted Ventriss out of the building.

Jim glanced at Blair. "After he messed with my senses in the bullpen, I registered a complaint with the SGF demanding that Ventriss be removed as my guide and as a guide to any sentinel. There was a hearing; Ventriss was there, the SGF, my PD Rep, and a couple of Ventriss' lawyers. Unfortunately for Ventriss, he had been heard saying he was going to mess with my senses until I gave up being a cop and other incidents were brought up showing he was not supporting his sentinel properly. His defense that he was joking around didn't wash and his guide ratings were reviewed and he was removed as a guide. He's actually lucky, my PD Rep wanted to charge him with attempted murder."

"Shit," Blair swore. "Did the SGF explain how he was accredited?"

"They said it was a paperwork error."

"And they didn't offer you a different guide?"

"Yeah, they did. By that time I'd gotten a handle on the senses thing and whatever drugs they gave me had gotten out of my system, so I refused."

"What do you mean drugs?" Blair frowned.

"You know, bonding drugs."

"They're not supposed to be used. Only in severe emergencies. You shouldn't have been given any drugs."

Jim shrugged. "Like I said, there was a lot of manipulation going on when I came online."

Blair nodded his understanding. "You don't think it was a mistake, Ventriss being accredited?"

"No. My father and Ventriss' father were business partners for certain ventures. I'm sure my father had a hand in his being given guide status."

"Did you ever ask your father?" Blair asked. He couldn't imagine a father being so manipulative as to harm his son's welfare for a business venture.

"No. I had some very choice words for him and haven't spoken to him since."

"I'm sorry," Blair whispered. Oddly, he felt depressed, as if Jim's emotions were weighing heavily on him. He really felt a need to make Jim feel better, though he couldn't think how he could erase the abuse that Jim had endured at the hands of the SGF.

"Yeah, me too." Jim abruptly stood and began cleaning up. Blair rose to help him and the pair worked quickly washing and drying the dishes and cleaning the kitchen.

Finishing, Blair glanced at the living room. "There's a Jags game on tonight. Do you like basketball?"

"I love the Jags," Jim answered, grabbing two beers and heading inside.

Blair smiled as Jim relaxed. "I'm a huge fan of Orville Wallace."

Jim handed him a beer and Blair realized Jim feeling good made him feel good. He was responding as a guide to his sentinel's needs. He would have to be careful; he didn't want to push Jim into something he wasn't ready for. But something told Blair that Jim's opening up about personal issues was not normal, that this sentinel kept things under wrap. The rest of the Major Crimes team, all comrades in arms, hadn't known Jim was a sentinel. So Jim opening up just might be a sign that the sentinel was, if not ready for a sentinel guide relationship, at least moving in the direction of one.

Chapter 16

The next day, Jim dropped Blair off at the warehouse so he could get his car. Taking a quick second look through the warehouse and finding nothing more he could salvage, Blair headed to Rainier to let them know what had happened and to teach his class.

In the meantime, Jim went to see Senator Burns. He had an appointment with the senator at nine and pulled up in front of the senator's office at five minutes before nine. Getting out of his truck and thinking over Simon's demand that he 'use a little tact while speaking with someone so politically connected,' Jim walked in and smiled at the secretary. "I'm Detective Ellison. I have an appointment with Senator Burns."

"Yes." The woman nodded and turned to the door. "I'll let the Senator know you are here."

Ten minutes later, Jim was ushered into a large office. "Detective Ellison, hello," Burns stood and indicated Jim should take a seat. "I understand you are looking into the tragic death of Dr. Stone. I don't know how I could help but the resources of my office are at your disposal."

"Thank you." Jim took a seat and made a show of pulling out his notebook. "I understand," he continued, his eyes on the senator, "that you and Dr. Stone were working on a project together."

"Yes," the senator nodded. "Dr. Stone wanted to ease the lives of sentinels by adopting some regulations that would support them."

"What kinds of regulations?"

"Does that matter to the investigation?" Senator Burns asked, with a frown.

"It might, it might not. But the more information I have the more likely I am to find his killer."

"I see." The senator picked up a pen and began to tap it quietly on the desk. Jim guessed it was a nervous habit. "He wanted the SGF to supply housing for sentinels, specifically so that unbonded sentinels would get relief from their senses."

Jim didn't air his thoughts on that but watched the senator's movements. "Any other regulations?" he asked.

"Not that I am aware of," the senator answered. "I know he was proposing a few other changes but he hadn't shared them with me, yet."

"I see," Jim made a notation in his notebook, debating whether to challenge Burns' idea that unbonded sentinels live within housing supplied by the SGF. Deciding against it, Jim asked, "What will happen to the legislation now?"

"Dr. Brennan is the chairman of the SGF. I believe he is opposed to the idea. Without the backing of the SGF I doubt I will even propose the legislation."

"Can you tell me who else was to attend the meeting?"

“Dr. Howard, for legal advice, and Chancellor Edwards, since Rainier and the SGF are connected. You don’t think that whoever killed Dr. Stone did it to stop the legislation? I mean it would have to be someone out to get sentinels.”

“We are still at the initial stage of the investigation.” Jim stood, putting his notebook away. “Thank you, Senator.”

“Should you need any further help, Detective, feel free to contact me through my office.”

Jim nodded and turned to leave, but turned back momentarily and considered the senator. “Senator, when did Dr. Stone first contact you about possible legislation?”

“About a month and half ago. Since I chair the Sentinels and Guides Committee I think he wanted to get my backing before any proposals were made public.”

“That would make sense,” Jim agreed before heading to his truck.

Chapter 17

It was an hour’s drive to Dr. Stone’s sister’s home and Jim spent the first half of the ride mentally going over Senator Burns’ interview. Jim didn’t believe the senator was as naïve about Stone’s plans as he let on, but the senator knew which way the wind was blowing. He knew he wouldn’t get the legislation passed without SGF support and immediately distanced himself from it. To Jim’s way of thinking, it was one good outcome from the man’s death, but it made it even more likely that the SGF co-chair was killed to stop him from running over sentinels’ rights. Jim didn’t doubt the GCG sub group would be targeted if they tried to further the agenda. Those idiots would all be in danger.

“Guides,” Jim muttered, shaking his head, but then the image of Blair Sandburg popped into his head. Blair, who was so expressive and enthusiastic about helping sentinels; Blair who made his headaches go away and his senses act clear and sharp. “Shit,” Jim growled, thinking about Dr. Blair Sandburg, anthropologist and guide and what had happened the previous night.

At some point during the night, while lying in bed, Jim had started to hear thumping noises. He wondered what Sandburg could be doing that would cause the thumping. Thinking Sandburg had some kind of tic or maybe he was having some kind of seizure, Jim went down stairs to investigate. He moved quietly to the door of the guest room and glanced in. Blair was still, his breathing slow and even, but Jim could hear the thumping noise and it seemed to be coming from Blair. It was then Jim realized it was Blair’s heartbeat he was hearing. His senses had ratcheted up during the night and he could hear the guide.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Jim had gone back up to bed wondering how he would ever get back to sleep. The odd thing was he found the sound soothing and he had fallen asleep quickly.

And this morning he had felt good, better than he had felt in ages. Jim was not one to ignore evidence. He was after all a detective. He didn’t doubt his well-being was tied to the fact that there was a guide in

his house. He really would need to look up Sandburg and rethink the whole bonding issue. If Sandburg were amenable, they might consider bonding.

In a way, Jim knew it would be perfect. Blair was already working at the PD part time so they could continue to work together and when Blair wasn't there, Jim could keep his senses down.

Turning onto Route 81, Jim headed toward the Cascade suburbs and Ms. Eileen Candle, sister to Dr. Stone, his thoughts on guides and bonding.

As far as Jim knew, there were two kinds of bonds, platonic and sexual. When Jim had been bonded to Ventriss the bond had, thankfully, not been sexual. He remembered Ventriss looking him up and down right after he had been given drugs to keep him from suppressing his senses so they would imprint the guide. Ventriss' expression had been lewd and he had sneered, "If you want a sexual bond, I have to top."

Jim more out of it than anything else, still had the presence of mind to say "No, no sexual bond."

"And wasn't that a good thing," Jim said aloud as he drove. The last thing he would want or need was Ventriss fucking him. Wondering what kind of bond Blair Sandburg would want, Jim turned down a small side road and through a small shopping area, before pulling up in front of a white picket fence.

Getting out of the truck, Jim went up the three porch steps and knocked on the door. It was opened by a woman in her late forties with graying hair and large brown eyes. "Detective Ellison?" she asked, her voice soft and low.

Jim nodded holding up his badge. "Yes, ma'am, I'm Detective Ellison."

She smiled and nodded, opening the door wider, "Please come in." The front door opened into the living room and she indicated he should sit on the couch. "Can I get you anything, some coffee or soda?"

Jim could smell the coffee in the kitchen and nodded his head. "A coffee would be great."

"What do you put in your coffee?" she asked, turning towards the kitchen.

Jim watched her go. "Some milk if you have it, otherwise I'll drink it black," he answered, rising and walking over to a small end table where a bunch of family pictures were arranged. He could see pictures of a much younger Dr. Stone standing beside Mrs. Candle and two children. Another picture showed Dr. Stone holding an infant.

"That's my brother and my cousin's daughter, Irene. Vincent was the one who realized Irene is a sentinel. He made sure she got the training she needed."

"Does Irene work with the SGF?" Jim asked, placing the photo back down on the table.

"No, she and Vincent had a falling out over something to do with the SGF and she left. I don't think they've spoken in the last year."

"Any idea what they argued over?"

"You don't think Irene could have had anything to do with Vinnie's death?" Mrs. Candle asked, her eyes wide with concern.

"Actually, I'm trying to understand your brother, get a mental image of him. It may help me find his killer."

Mrs. Candle nodded. "I see." She glanced down at the picture. "I honestly don't know what they fought over. When Irene was a child, Vinnie was delighted that his second cousin was a sentinel, but after she went to Rainier for training something changed between them."

"I'd like to contact her; maybe she could give me some insights into your brother."

"She lives somewhere near Rainier; Irene Morgan. I'm afraid I've lost her address. We really don't see each other except at big family gatherings." Jim nodded and wrote down the name before sitting on the couch, a mug of coffee before him.

"Can you tell me," he began, "did your brother have any problems with anyone?"

"He never mentioned any. I'm afraid we weren't that close."

Two hours later, Jim pulled over by a coffee shop and ordered coffee, carrying the cup to his truck where he reviewed his notes on his interview with Ms. Candle. She hadn't given him much of a lead, but Irene Morgan might be able to fill in a few blanks. Pulling out his cellphone Jim called the PD and asked for Irene Morgan's address. Seeing her address was not far from where he was, he decided he'd head over there. He then called Simon to let him know what was going on and went to visit Ms. Morgan.

Irene Morgan lived in one of the small efficiency apartments that students who didn't have dorms used. Entering the building and absently noting there was no security and a poor lock on the front door, Jim walked up the flight of stairs to her door. Knocking and getting no answer, Jim glanced around looking for someone who might know her. No one was around in any of the apartments (not a surprise since it was just about lunchtime and most students would be in class) so he decided to come back later or find her at Rainier. He still had to track down Mark Klock and Lisa Wilson. Jim planned on going into the registrar's office and getting their schedules. Getting in his truck, Jim decided he'd see if Blair wanted to join him for a quick meal before finding the two students, and headed to Blair's office.

Chapter 18

Blair walked into his office after teaching his ten o'clock class and dropped the papers he had collected on his desk. He had already informed the school and the SGF of his temporary change of address and thought he would grade some papers before heading to the PD. Hopefully, Jim would be back from interviewing Dr. Stone's sister.

He opened the first book and lifted his pen, reading the introduction. When he reached the end of the page, Blair looked back at the question and shook his head. He had read the words but didn't remember

if it even answered the question. Knowing he wasn't paying attention and his students deserved better, Blair closed the book and sat back, his mind on Jim Ellison.

Blair had only just met Jim but he could tell Jim was a decent man and a sentinel in the truest form, a protector. It was a shame what had happened to him at the hands of the SGF, but if only Jim would reconsider the bonding issue. Blair would be more than willing to offer his services as a guide.

Blair had been working for the SGF as an unbonded guide for the last two years. Thinking back, Blair had met several sentinels who had been interested in him as a guide, but Blair had never felt the right connection, until Jim. Closing his eyes, Blair imagined the kind of bond they could have, all those hard muscles in his arms. Somehow Blair didn't think Jim would be interested in that kind of bond but hell, a man could dream. He smiled at the idea as he thought of Jim's broad chest, Blair's fingers sliding down his washboard stomach, going lower.

He was still daydreaming when there was a knock at his door and an older gentleman walked in. "Dr. Sandburg?" the man asked.

Blair schooled his features and stood, wondering who this man was. He knew he didn't have any meetings this afternoon. "Yes," he said, politely.

"My name is William Ellison," the man answered in a clipped voice, stepping closer but not offering his hand in greeting. Despite being tamped down, Blair's empathy picked up hostility radiating from this man and realized just what type of meeting this would be.

Deliberately taking his time, Blair glanced over the man. This was Jim's father, the man who had tried to manipulate Jim by using the SGF against him. "Mr. Ellison, how can I help you?" Blair asked, his voice polite. In the back of his head a small voice warned Blair to tread slowly and carefully here. William Ellison was a barracuda and dangerous.

"I understand you are a guide and living with my son," William stated, irritation in every word. "Have you bonded to Jimmy?"

Blair frowned at the totally impolite question. "I don't understand how that is your concern," Blair answered, keeping his voice calm as he looked over the man. Ellison wasn't as tall as Jim, but Blair could see a family resemblance. They shared some facial characteristics, though William Ellison's eyes were a darker blue. But there were some big differences too. Though Jim could seem distant and had a glare that could make criminals cringe, he didn't have an air of contempt. The look William Ellison was giving Blair made Blair think William saw him as a bug that needed squishing.

William, if possible, stiffened more as he glared at Blair. "I have gone to great lengths to ensure my son has a guide of the right social and economic status. You may be a doctor but you don't have the same social connections. Your mother was a hippy and you are the product of that lifestyle. My son needs a guide with aspirations beyond academia." William Ellison spit out the word academia as if it were a dirty and shameful, and Blair found that far more upsetting than his reference to Blair being a bastard.

Blair was, in fact, a bastard. His mother had been a free spirit and he had no idea who his father was, but she had more than made up for the lack of a father by doting on him. Ellison couldn't hurt him by calling

him a bastard. Instead, Blair focused on what Ellison had said. "When you say you've gone to great lengths, do you mean your little plot with Dr. Stone to have the SGF help select guides? Did you have a guide in mind?"

William Ellison frowned at the questions, not acknowledging them. "How much?"

"What?"

"How much for you to get out of my son's life?"

"Out of your son's life, what do you mean?" Blair was fairly certain he knew the answer but he wanted to hear William Ellison say it before throwing his money back in his face and throwing him out of the office.

"I'll pay you. I don't want you living with my son and I don't want you bonding with him."

"Wouldn't that be my decision and Blair's?" came a frigid voice from the doorway.

Both men looked at Jim standing in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest as he glared at his father.

"Jimmy, I-" William paused.

"You what?" Jim uncrossed his arms and entered the room. He nodded to Blair and turned to look at his father. Blair could see the tension in Jim's body, the tight control, and not even thinking about it, went over and laid a hand on Jim's arm. The guide trying to ease his sentinel's distress.

"I was trying to get you a more appropriate guide."

"A more appropriate guide," Jim snarled. "You mean like Ventriss."

William Ellison winced. "That was a mistake," he said, softly.

"I told you then, I will not tolerate your interference in my decisions as a sentinel. Did you really think I wouldn't know you were working with Stone?"

William Ellison floundered, not sure what to say. His eyes swept the office and then landed on Blair standing beside Jim. "This is what you want as a guide?" He waved an arm dismissively at Blair, his voice contemptuous. "Some hippie wannabe with no connections. You need someone who will help you advance."

"Dad." Jim sounded more tired than angry. "I'm a cop, it is who I am. I have told you this before. Either accept it or get out of my life."

William Ellison opened his mouth but nothing came out. He glanced over his son and shook his head. Finally, without a word, he turned and walked out.

"Take a deep breath," Blair whispered beside him. "Hold it for five seconds and then release it."

"Why?"

"It will help release some of your tension and anger."

"But I want to be angry," Jim answered in a clipped voice.

"He's totally wrong, Jim, but he is trying to do what he thinks is best for you."

"You're wrong, Chief. He's doing what's best for him, not me."

Blair didn't argue. He knew there was some truth in what Jim was saying though he suspected that William was in denial about that. "Let go of the anger before you grind your teeth to powder," Blair advised, noting how Jim's jaw muscles were jumping.

"I'm sorry my father bothered you. He had no right."

Glancing over Jim, Blair shook his head. He agreed, Jim's father shouldn't have made demands of Blair, but more importantly, he should never have even thought of interfering with bonding between a sentinel and guide.

"Let it go, Jim. It's over."

Jim glanced at the doorway. His father had assumed Blair was going to be his guide. He could see how anyone could get that impression. Blair and Jim were both unbonded and Blair was staying with him. Actually, whether he bonded or not, this would keep William Ellison out of his business. Deciding that was a good thing, Jim took a breath and nodded. "I have to track down Lisa Wilson and Mark Klock but I thought as long as I was going to the registrar's office at Rainier I'd see if you want to grab some lunch."

Blair could feel the sentinel's emotions settle and smiled. "I'd love to. There's a great little lunch place nearby that makes incredible salads."

"Um, I hope they make more than salads."

"Great sandwiches," Blair reassured, grabbing his backpack. "And then I can go with you to interview Klock and Wilson."

Jim glanced down at Blair and gave a resigned sigh. "You do know you're not a cop."

"Yeah, I do. But till this is over, Man, I am your partner."

Walking out the door of Blair's office, Jim found he didn't mind the idea.

Their first stop was the registrar's office where Jim got Klock's and Wilson's schedules. Looking over them, Jim indicated Wilson. "She has a guide class at three. We could meet up with her then," he suggested. "And Klock works part time in one of the SGF offices answering phones. He's on today so we could go there after speaking with her."

Having decided on a course of action, the pair went to lunch and the food was every bit as good as Blair said it was. Finishing, they walked over to Rainer's Burton Hall (named after the explorer who had documented sentinels in tribal cultures) and headed to where the guide course would be held. Stopping in front of the door, Jim indicated the classroom. "You know Lisa Wilson, right?" Blair nodded. "Let me know when she arrives."

A little later, students started wandering in and Blair indicated a smallish girl with light brown hair. Pulling out his badge, Jim stopped her. "Ms. Wilson," he showed his badge. "May I have a word with you?"

Seeing the detective with Blair, she blinked and nodded. "Yes?" she asked, nervously.

"We are investigating Dr. Stone's death and interviewing people."

"I didn't know him that well," she hedged, glancing at the classroom and then at Blair. "Dr. Sandburg, what have I got to do with Dr. Stone's death?" she asked, nervously.

"Ms. Wilson," Jim immediately brought her attention back to him. "Dr. Stone was involved with a sub group, the GCG. Were you a part of this group?"

Lisa turned red as she looked down. "I...Yes," she straightened her shoulders and took a step away from the classroom. "And why not!" she answered, defensively. "Sentinels need guides. Why shouldn't the guides have some say in the lives of sentinels?" She demanded, her voice pitching higher as her voice became belligerent. "Have you even seen who the sentinels pick? I've never been chosen by a sentinel and I'm a guide. Why shouldn't I have a chance to get a sentinel!"

Blair opened his mouth to answer, ready to point out that guides did not 'get' sentinels like some kind of pet, but Jim jumped in, nudging Blair to keep him quiet. "Ms. Wilson, did you receive a threatening note about the GCG?"

The woman stopped and blinked. "That note? I didn't think it was for real. I thought it was a joke."

"We're taking this as a real threat. Do you still have the note?"

"No, I threw it away."

"You need to be careful." Jim gave her a stern look and she looked up at him, losing color as she seemed to deflate, before nodding. "If you see anything unusual, you should call the PD."

"Tell me Lisa, you've been studying sentinels, are your scores high enough to assist a sentinel?" Blair asked, unwilling to leave the subject unchallenged.

She pressed her lips together, turning them white as she glared at Blair, her eyes narrowing. "What are you saying?"

"Guides don't own or control sentinels, they support sentinels. You should really consider what type of support you are capable of giving a sentinel before going to another GCG meeting."

She looked at Blair a moment as it dawned on her what he thought of her guiding abilities and then stormed passed the two men, saying, "I have a class."

Jim watched her go and then turned to Blair. "Did you really need to tell her that?"

"Yeah, Jim, as a member of the SGF, I did."

Jim shook his head. "Let's find Mark Klock, and this time, Chief, keep your opinions to yourself."

Blair nodded and glancing at the office number where Mark Klock worked, headed toward one of the elevators.

Arriving at the third floor office and finding the door slightly open, Jim paused, scenting the air and putting a hand on Blair's shoulder. "Stay here," he commanded, as he stepped inside, his eyes moving around the room, and coming to rest on Mark Klock's body. He was seated at one of three desks in the room and there was blood spread out around his chest, testament to the fact that Mark Klock was shot in the chest. Automatically, Jim walked over and touched his neck, looking for a pulse but there was none and the body was already cooling. Jim stepped back glancing around the room, noting the GCG letter splattered with blood on the desk in front of the body.

From behind him, Jim heard Blair gasp in shock as he stood in the doorway. "God," Blair whispered. "Mark Klock too!"

Stepping out of the room, Jim gave Blair a pat on the shoulder and called Simon telling his boss he had found Klock's body and asking that Simon send the Crime Scene Unit.

"Can you find out who else has offices around here," Jim requested of Blair, "and see if anyone is around."

Blair, white faced, nodded and began walking up and down the hall looking to see who was around. He found two TAs, one wearing headphones so he heard nothing and the other had only just gotten out of his class. Blair took down their names and asked them to stay in their offices until the police could talk with them and then returned to Jim with the information.

"I'll interview them as soon as the scene is secured," Jim said, as he took the information from Blair. "They may have seen something and not realized it." He glanced in the room. "I think I'm going to have all the GCG members at the precinct tomorrow morning. I'll have some patrols pick them up. These people need to know there is a possibility they are being stalked."

Blair glanced into the office where Mark Klock had worked and then quickly looked away. "We do see a connection," he agreed.

Jim nodded. "And it gives us some points for investigation but we can't jump to a conclusion."

Blair considered this a moment. "But you believe they are connected," he stated and Jim nodded.

"Yeah," he turned and glanced at the elevator. "CSU is here."

Blair glanced down the hall, seeing the elevator was on the first floor, and no one in the hall. He hid a smile as he realized Jim's sentinel abilities were kicking in, probably because he was keeping company with a guide. *"Maybe," a voice whispered in Blair's head, "he might want to keep company, permanently."*

Within minutes the elevator door opened and a CSU team and coroner came down the hall. Jim waved them over. "Serena, Dan." He indicated the room. "I went in to check if he was alive but didn't disturb anything. I'm going to interview people on the floor. Can you send me a preliminary report as soon as you have it?"

"Sure," Serena answered, putting on gloves. Jim gave her a nod and smile and then indicated Blair should lead him to the TAs.

Three hours later, after interviewing the TAs on the floor and finding they had seen and heard nothing, Jim and Blair sat in Simon's office.

"So, you think our best chance of finding the killer is to bring all the members of this splinter group in," Simon said and Jim nodded.

"Whoever this person is, he or she has some connection with this group. The perp knows all the members. They all received threats."

Simon nodded. "I'll ask them all in for questioning in the morning. If nothing else we can talk to them about protection. Give the list to Rhonda and she'll make some calls."

Jim nodded rising. "I'll see you tomorrow, Sir. Come on, Chief."

Chapter 19

The ride back to the loft was quiet; Jim was considering all the different parts of the case, Blair debating how long he could stay with Jim before he became unwelcome, and trying to keep the idea of bonding with Jim out of his head. Getting out of the Ford, Blair glanced around. His car was near the university but there was plenty of parking over here and if he continued to travel with Jim, he'd keep his car over here.

"How about we order in some Chinese food or pizza?" Jim asked as they got out of the car.

"How about I make you dinner?" Blair answered.

"I don't know what's in the frig. I haven't been shopping for anything more than a few basics in a while."

Blair nodded his understanding. More often than not his own refrigerator had been empty. "I noticed we passed a market just before we turned onto Prospect. I could run over and get a few ingredients. I can make something quick."

"I'll drive you over." Jim turned back to his truck.

"No," Blair shook his head. "This will give you a little time to unwind and relax. I know this day had to be hard, what with," he wanted to say your father's little visit, but finished, "all that happened. Take a few minutes to clear your head. It won't take me long to go to the market."

Jim looked over Blair, his senses, despite being tamped down, sharper and crisper than they had been since coming online. Not even realizing he was doing it, Jim catalogued Blair's state. Deciding Blair might need a little head room himself, he nodded and pulled out his wallet.

"No, man, I got it," Blair turned and started down the block. Jim watched him go, smiling when he saw Blair's curls bouncing as he walked. When he saw Blair turn the corner three blocks away he turned and entered the loft.

Jim debated taking a shower, but he realized that Blair didn't have a key and so, instead of heading to the shower, went to the kitchen and inventoried what was in the house and what they might need to get through the rest of the week. Chuckling when he realized the house had a supply of beer, coffee, milk, popcorn, and pretzels – and little else – he decided that if Blair was going to stay with him, he should get more food in.

Grabbing a beer and closing the frig, Jim looked around the living room and realized he was working under the assumption that Blair would continue to stay with him. And that might not be the case. Sure, Blair stayed with him last night after the explosion, but that didn't mean Blair didn't have other places he might prefer.

Jim knew his senses were better with the guide near. For the first time in weeks he was headache free and, if he were honest with himself, he liked having Blair with him. But that didn't mean the guide would want to stay or be *his* guide. Bonding with a guide was not something to be taken lightly, so he shelved the idea for now and walked into the living room.

Turning on the news, Jim watched the report about the death of Mark Klock. Any report about a sentinel or guide always made the news since the general population found their doings fascinating. Jim guessed all the hoopla around sentinels and guides was probably a byproduct of their being protectors and guardians of the tribe. They made people feel safe. As the news was finishing, Jim heard Blair coming up the stairs and he went over, opened the door, and grabbed one of several bags Blair was carrying.

"What all did you buy?" he asked, amusement in his voice.

"Just a few things." Blair peered over the bag and smiled. "I mean you took me in so I should do something to pay you back." They put the bags on the counter and began pulling out vegetables. "You know, as a sentinel, you should be eating organic foods. And I noticed some of the products in the bathroom, they're all wrong for you."

"What do you mean wrong?"

"You're an elite sentinel. You need products designed for an elite."

"I'm using what Ventriss suggested."

"It figures," Blair muttered in disgust. "He suggested basic sentinel products and that would be fine for most sentinels, but not for elites. You need products that are not only organic, but are purified, so they won't aggravate your senses." Blair paused and frowned turning to the sink and glancing around. "I didn't buy any cleaners because I didn't get a look at what you have under the sink."

"I have the usual cleaners," Jim answered.

"Usual?" Blair questioned, cautiously.

Jim nodded. "Bleach, ammonia -" Before Jim could continue Blair spun to look at him in shock.

"That stuff is bad for normal people, never mind sentinels. Didn't your last-" he paused. Of course Ventriss hadn't told Jim to stay away from that stuff. Ventriss wasn't a real guide. "It's bad," he finished, calmly. "Tomorrow I'll get you some sentinel safe stuff. No wonder you've been suffering with headaches." He sighed, shaking his head. This really wasn't Jim's fault. The SGF had screwed him over. "While I'm here, for as long as I am here, I'll deal with what you need to function as a sentinel."

"Thanks, Sandburg," Jim answered with a tentative smile. "And I have to admit, since you've been around, my headaches have eased."

Blair returned the smile, his face lighting with pleasure, hoping that Jim just might change his mind about bonding. Blair would be more than happy to offer himself as a guide. "I'll get dinner going." He pulled out a pan and a cutting board.

Chapter 20

Dennis Greene, Lisa Wilson and nine others were sitting in a large conference room on the third floor when Simon, Jim and Blair entered the room. All looked up, some with relief, others with a hostile glare, as Jim took a seat at the front of the table, Blair taking the seat to his right while Simon stood leaning at the door, arms folded.

Blair had been warned not to engage the group, so he settled for glaring as he sat back, looking at the group.

Immediately, nine people started to speak at once, all with demands for information, some demanding it of Jim, others of Blair. Deciding he didn't want to shout over the crowd, Jim held up one hand and waited till everyone quieted down. When the last demand petered out, Jim glanced around. "Thank you for coming. As you all know, there have been some threats made against the members of your little group. We are taking the threats seriously. Mark Klock was killed yesterday while working in the SGF office. We suspect that someone who is in some way connected to this group killed him."

Shock settled in as the group looked around and Jim watched them trying to see any unusual reactions. They all seemed nervous but that could be because they were in a police station and receiving death threats. Jim knew he would need to interview them separately if we wanted to look for any unusual responses and would take that job on starting the next day.

"You think one of us did it?" one of the girls whispered.

Jim glanced at the name tag she was wearing. "Ms. Mitchell, we think you may all be targets." He waited for that piece of information to settle in. "Every one of you received death threats for your involvement in a guide sub group. We think someone connected to you is behind this. Were there any other members? Anyone the group may have come in contact with?"

As Jim asked, he sat back and watched their reactions, looking for anything out of place. For a few minutes, the members looked from one to another. Finally, Dennis Greene answered, "Dr. Stone asked us to keep the group quiet. He felt the time hadn't arrived for us to announce our presence or our beliefs."

"So there are no missing members? Is there anyone else who attended a meeting with you and Dr. Stone?" Again, they all stayed quiet shaking their heads. "We'll try it this way. We'll go around the group and each of you will explain how you were recruited for this group." Turning to Jim's left, he pointed to the first person, Stan James.

An hour later, Jim was no closer to a solution. Each member had been recruited by Dr. Stone from one of his classes. As far as Jim could tell, they were all spoiled brats from wealthy families and all were used to getting their own way. Not only that, each of them demanded a right to 'have' a sentinel. Jim could sense Blair's growing anger at the groups' declarations, his need for deep, calming breaths increasing as the small group talked. Rubbing his forehead to relieve some tension, Jim glanced at Simon and stood, all of the members looking up. "If you'll excuse me." He indicated that they should stay seated with an almost contemptuous wave of his hand. "I'll be right back." Blair followed him and Simon, the three stepping out into the hall.

"There may be a connection," Jim said, "but they don't know what it is."

"No," Simon agreed. "We'll have to arrange security for them."

Jim nodded.

"I have an idea," Blair broke in, and despite the fact that he wasn't a cop and had only been working with Jim for a few days, he was gratified to see both cops turn to him, taking him seriously. "What if I joined this group and was a bit outspoken about it. Maybe, we could flush out the killer."

"You're not a cop, Sandburg," Jim answered with some force. He was surprised at just how protective he was feeling towards the guide.

"Right, I'm a member of the SGF. As such, I could pull this off." He glanced from Jim, who was frowning with disapproval, to Simon. "If nothing else, we could see if they're still under surveillance and as a member of the SGF it is my responsibility to put a stop to this." He waved his hand at the other room.

"And what happens if this person comes after you?" Jim asked.

Blair considered this a moment. "Two of those 'so called' guides," Blair held up his fingers, making quotes in the air, "have sentinels. I could pretend Jim's my sentinel. That way he could be around to watch out for things."

Simon glanced at Jim looking for his opinion. He would not back this if Jim didn't agree. "It might be a way..." he said, cautiously. "We would be able to track the group and get some information."

Jim glanced, first at Simon, then at Blair, not liking the idea. "Can't we get a PD guide involved?"

"We could," Simon agreed, "but Sandburg is right. He's a guide and a member of the SGF and he's staying with you. It would be the perfect cover. Everyone would believe you're bonded. He'd just need to make a lot of noise about a sentinel who doesn't listen. And you not listening, it is something everyone will believe." As Simon said this, he smiled. With Jim's bearing and Blair's position, it might work.

"The idiots in there," Jim indicated the room, "could blow the whole set up. Too many people in the know."

"Despite the fact that they're all idiots, they're all intelligent," Simon countered. "And once we've got Sandburg set up as a member of the group, we could put them in safe houses."

Jim glanced at Blair and then nodded, though he knew he wasn't happy about the turn of events. In the back of his mind, he knew it was some kind of sentinel reaction to the idea of putting a guide in danger. "Okay," he gave in, reluctantly. "But I want Sandburg under surveillance at all times. I'll keep an eye on him at the loft, but when I'm not with him I want to know someone is."

"Agreed." Simon glanced over at the guide. "Welcome to the team, Sandburg." Simon reached over and opened the door, the three walking in.

As they walked in, Stan James called out. "Detective, we do know one thing, it can't be a sentinel who did this. No sentinel would hurt a guide."

"They're not guides," Blair muttered, quietly as they circled the table. Only Jim had actually heard the muttering and he sighed, sure Blair could not be stopped from confronting the supposed guides.

Once again taking their seats at the table, Jim and Blair looked around the small group. "All of you are potential targets for this killer," Jim stated. "And so we are going to try and flush him out. How do you let each other know about meetings?"

Dennis Greene answered. "We post a notice on the meeting board in the SGF mailroom, usually two days before the meeting."

Jim nodded. "Good. We want you to post that notice again. If there's anything special you do to make it sound important, do it. We're going to add a new member to the group." Jim indicated Blair. Jim could hear some muttered responses as all eyes turned to Blair.

"I will pretend I agree with your philosophy." Blair glanced around the table. "And I'll be loud and clear about it. That way I attract the attention of the killer."

"In the meantime," Jim added. "You will all be given police protection and placed in safe houses."

The members glanced at one another unsure but Dennis Greene finally spoke up. "What makes you think Sandburg can pull it off? I mean my sentinel will go berserk when he hears what's going on."

"You didn't tell him," Blair accused and Dennis Greene shrugged. Shaking his head in disgust, Blair looked over the group. "I'll make sure people think I feel sentinels are inferior to guides so that we catch this killer but once this is over, not one of you will get to work with a sentinel. I've seen your empathy scores. Can any of you support a strong sentinel?" Blair didn't wait for an answer but continued, disgust

evident in his voice. "You all talk about how you want strong sentinels to work with, but you don't want to work with sentinels, you want to own them. And could any one of you even support a strong sentinel and keep him or her healthy?"

No one in the room answered, eyes looking everywhere but at Blair as he glanced around. "Only two of you even rated high enough to have guiding abilities – and those abilities were low. When this is over, don't be surprised if your guide status is revoked."

"Now wait a minute," Lisa Wilson started to complain.

Blair glared at her. "Tell me, Lisa, could you support someone like Jim? Do you even have a high enough rating to recognize that Jim is a sentinel? He's an elite. If you can't recognize an elite sitting in the same room, what business do you have guiding a sentinel?"

All eyes turned to Jim. "You're a sentinel?" Ms. Mitchell whispered. "And we've been talking about sentinels like they are-" She stopped, her face turning red.

"I expect," Blair said, his voice hard as steel, "that after the killer is caught you will give up your guide accreditation. Otherwise, I will see to it that your status is pulled, publicly."

"I have a sentinel and I'm not giving him away," Dennis sneered.

"Giving him away," Blair scoffed. "I suspect he'll jump at the chance of getting a real guide."

"Today," Jim cut off the conversation with a glare at Dennis, "post the notice for a meeting tomorrow. Blair will come in as a new member and I'll be going in as his sentinel."

"Are you?" Ms. Mitchell asked.

"You can't even tell if we're bonded," Blair answered in disgust. "And you expected to be a guide."

"Easy, Chief," Jim said softly and glanced around the room. "The only way this will work is if you don't tell anyone it is a setup. We'll keep you protected today but under no circumstances can you discuss this with anyone. And believe me," Jim's voice dropped to a growl that made more than one of the so called guides shiver. "We will be listening."

Chapter 21

After the meeting, the members of the GCG were escorted home by police officers – except Dennis Greene. He was taken by Jim and Blair to the SGF mailroom where he posted his notice for the next meeting. Afterwards, he was taken to his office and his sentinel called.

When Sentinel Ben Grower arrived, he looked over at Dennis, seated at his desk and then eyed Jim and Blair suspiciously before stepping over to stand by his guide.

"Ben, this is Detective Sentinel Ellison and Guide Sandburg," Dennis introduced. "They're looking into the deaths of Dr. Stone and Mark Klock."

Ben, a short man with olive skin, dark eyes and black hair, frowned. "Why would you be involved?"

Both Blair and Jim wanted to hear Dennis' response.

"Well," he began uncomfortably. "It seems the killer is targeting a sub group within the SGF and I am a member of the group."

"A sub group?"

"Nothing you need worry about," Dennis answered, dismissively and, aware of Blair's increased respiration, Jim reached out and squeezed his arm to keep him from responding.

"There may be someone after Mr. Greene," Jim filled in. "We thought it best to let you know."

Ben glanced over at his guide and then at Jim and Blair. "Why?" he asked Jim and Blair, not Dennis.

"They-" Jim began but was cut off.

"It's a group that wants to give guides control of sentinels," Blair burst out, his voice tight as he glared at Dennis.

"What?" Ben asked Blair, but his eyes were pinned on Dennis.

"The group was headed by Dr. Stone," Jim answered, a hand squeezing Blair's arm not too gently to keep him quiet. "They wanted legal rights over sentinels and Dr. Stone headed the group. All members of the group received threats and two members have been killed."

"And you were a member of this group?" Ben said softly, his eyes on Dennis. Dennis was staring at his desk, concentrating on the papers in front of him as he shrugged. "Why?" Ben asked.

"We just wanted a bit more say about things that help sentinels," Dennis said, quietly.

Blair glanced at Jim on hearing this, ready to jump in again. But seeing Jim's glare, decided to keep his mouth shut as Ben watched his guide. "You're not telling the whole truth," Ben answered. "Your respiration and heartbeat are way up."

"We'll discuss this later," Dennis muttered but Ben shook his head and turned to Blair and Jim.

"Tell me," he asked.

Jim glanced at Blair. The guide, knowing Jim didn't want him to interfere, was biting his lower lip to keep from responding, his body shaking with anger and Jim realized the guide in Blair wanted to help the sentinel. And though Jim admitted it was admirable, it also made him uncomfortable. Blair, *his* unbonded guide, was talking with another sentinel. "The sub group wanted to control where sentinels lived, choose who they bonded with, and what jobs they could or could not have."

Ben turned and looked at Dennis and both Jim and Blair could see his body tense. "You know I have put up with your arrogance because, well, because I'm not a really strong sentinel and had to settle for a mediocre guide. But this is over. I am not your doormat and things will change, Dennis."

Dennis Greene looked up in shock, losing his color. "Is that what you think of me, Ben? That I'm mediocre?" he answered angrily, but Ben shook his head and held up a hand.

"Don't say anything," he answered angrily. He pointed at Blair. "I can tell this guide is upset by what's going on and you, you're part of it." There was no missing the disgust in Ben's voice.

"We need to take both of you to a safe house," Jim cut in, not having time or inclination to watch the sentinel and guide hash out their problems. "We are going to try and flush out the killer so we need to make sure you're safe and out of sight."

"Fine," Ben answered, turning from his guide to look at Jim and Blair. "Can I pick up a few things from my home?"

Jim nodded. "We'll walk you out and have a patrol take you to a safe house."

They watched as Dennis, saying nothing, his eyes on the floor, stood to follow them. The four men then left Rainier and Jim took them to central booking to arrange a safe house. The ride had been silent and after they dropped off the pair, Jim turned to Blair. "What do you think will happen with them?"

"I could feel a lot of negativity between them. But they are bonded, so I don't know if it will change the partnership."

"But?" Jim asked, knowing Blair had picked up more and as a guide would have insight into the relationship.

"But, I would imagine there will be some changes in the partnership. I think Ben telling Dennis what he thought of his guiding abilities and his attitude will help them get a more balanced relationship."

Nodding Jim steered Blair to the elevator. "Good. We need to set up who will attend the meeting and then discuss how we will play out our roles."

"Who will attend the meeting?" Blair asked.

"We'll get a couple of PD officers at the meeting pretending they are guides. It would be suspicious if no one was there. We'll just have to spin some tale about the new members."

"But they're not guides," Blair stated and then wanted to smack himself. "Neither were the GCG members," he added with a rueful shake of his head. "How about you suggest they were from a group at another university?"

Jim nodded as he ushered Blair into the elevator. "Yeah, that might work."

"And what about our roles, man?"

"We're going to have to act as if you're a member of the group. Which means you're going to have to act like some arrogant bastard." Jim glanced at the big blue eyes. "I'm not so sure you can pull it off, Chief."

Blair gave derisive huff and practically snarled, "Don't worry about me, Ellison, I can handle the role," the twinkle in his eyes belying the harsh tone.

Jim smiled in return as they got off the elevator and entered the bullpen, Jim going over and knocking on Simon's door to fill him in. Blair debated following Jim but was still unsure of his own standing with the captain. Instead, he walked over to own desk. Stopping there, he glanced across the room at Jim's desk and then at his own before deciding the separation wouldn't work. Grabbing his chair, he pushed it next to Jim's, taking a seat.

Megan, watching him, smiled. "Hey Sandy," she greeted. "I hear you and Jim are sharing space at home. Dare I hope Jim found his guide?"

Blair shook his head, aware that while Megan was looking for gossip, he could sense an underlying concern for Jim. After the error he had made by telling Megan Jim was a sentinel, he was not going to say anything despite the fact that yes, he was sure Jim was his sentinel. He only had to convince the sentinel of that fact. "My place blew up while I was out with Jim at the SGF." He shrugged.

"Your place blew up," she repeated.

Blair nodded. "A drug lab next door."

"Until you arrived," Megan continued, "Jim was unapproachable. I didn't realize then but understand now that it was because he was suffering because of his senses." She sighed and reached out to lift a file on her desk. "If we had known, we could have made life a little easier for Jim."

"Easier?" Blair questioned. As a guide, he knew many ways to help a sentinel but he doubted that most of the population knew those ways.

Megan nodded. "We could have used sentinel safe products. My perfume, when I was near, must have really bothered him. I would imagine Rafe's cologne would do the same. No wonder he steered clear." She glanced up at Blair. "He's a strong sentinel, isn't he?"

Debating an answer, Blair looked at Megan. If she knew he was a strong sentinel, she would watch out a bit more, but he wasn't sure if he was betraying a confidence. "His senses are strong," he said, not going into detail.

"So, if you become his guide, his solve rate will go through the roof," she concluded with a grin. "That means Major Crimes will have the highest solve rate in the PD."

"Doesn't it already?"

"Yeah, but we only beat homicide by two cases last year. Jim online would be bringing in a ringer."

"I see," Blair answered with a smile of his own.

"Hey Sandburg," Jim called as he came out of Simon's office and walked over. "We've got to meet the team we'll be working with."

"The captain already put one together?"

Jim nodded. "We don't let the grass grow under our feet in Major Crimes." He turned to Megan. "Connor, we'd like you on the team. We're putting a bullseye on Sandburg's back and I trust you to keep an eye on him."

"Sure," she stood. "But what are we doing?"

"We're meeting in conference room 3. I'll explain it all there."

Chapter 22

Megan Connor tossed her hair back as she entered Rainer University's SGF office. "Hey mates," she greeted, loudly. "I'm here for the GCG conference. Can someone direct me?" Behind her, several other men and women entered, looking around. A minute later so did Blair and Jim, Jim's eyes darting about the room.

Dennis Greene, Eddie Rugges and Lisa Wilson, three of the most outspoken members of the group, looked over at Megan and nodded with forced smiles. They had been escorted to the SGF by undercover agents, the parts they were to play, carefully explained. "Dennis Greene," he stood and held out his hand. "It's down the hall, the last door on the left. I'm heading there myself."

Megan nodded, indicating the group. "We were invited to this meeting by Dr. Stone. Is he in the conference room?"

"I'm afraid not," Dennis Greene, mumbled. "But one of his assistants, Dr. Sandburg, will run the meeting." He indicated Blair who followed Megan into the room.

At the statement, Megan turned and smiled. "Hello," she walked over and extended her hand. "I'm Megan Brooks from LAGS, the LA Guide School. Dr. Stone contacted me about this meeting and I came with a few other guides."

"I've never heard of LAGS," Blair answered, taking the offered hand.

"We're not really a school. We're a small splinter group of the LA Sentinel Guide Foundation. We're just a group of like-minded guides. We were looking forward to working with Dr. Stone."

Blair nodded. "Yes, Dr. Stone had mentioned that he had contacted you." Turning, he glanced at Jim standing behind him and then turned back to Megan. "This is my newly bonded sentinel, Jim." Blair raised a hand dismissively, shooing him away. "Why don't you go and find yourself a cup of coffee or something. This meeting is for guides." The words were said with such condescension that even the other guides frowned.

Jim glanced at the guide before his eyes shifted to the floor and he shuffled uncomfortably. "I might zone."

Blair gave a sigh and rolled his eyes. "Very well," he said with disdain. "Go sit in an empty office. I'll be in a meeting." Blair started to turn away dismissively, but then turned back. "We will have a white noise

generator on, so don't bother pushing up your hearing. You won't hear me and you'll end up zoning longer."

Jim nodded and glanced around the room and then turned and walked out the door.

"Sentinels, big babies the bunch of them," Blair muttered a bit loudly before smiling at Megan. "The conference room is this way."

He led them to a small room. Walking in, Blair clicked on a white noise generator lest a sentinel besides Jim was around and indicated everyone should sit. "Detective Ellison will be monitoring the area, looking for anyone suspicious. We just need to sit for an hour and then leave talking about sentinels." Blair's gaze moved to Dennis Greene, his face showing his distaste for the man. "I presume the meetings ran for about an hour."

"Sometimes," Greene mumbled. "Sometimes they went a little over."

"And you sat with Dr. Stone and talked about sentinels as though they were pets," Megan said, her voice reflecting her revulsion as she glared at Greene.

Greene had no idea how to answer, so he said nothing, his eyes on the table. It didn't take empathic ability, of which he had nearly none anyway, to know the people in this room were disgusted with him.

"I'm sure your sentinel found the whole thing upsetting," Blair added.

"He broke the bond," Greene replied in a quiet voice and both Eddie Rugges and Lisa Wilson gasped.

It was on the tip of his tongue to say, "*It couldn't have been much of a bond, considering how low a guide you are,*" but Blair held his tongue. The breaking of a bond was a big deal. It certainly didn't happen often and depending on the strength of the bond could go from painful to fatal. The fact that the sentinel had broken the bond and that Dennis Greene was sitting here in reasonable health said a lot about the strength of their bond – or, more accurately, the lack of strength.

Blair glanced around at the assembled group, his eyes traveling over the so called guides before he turned to Megan. "I hope this works. I hate treating Jim this way."

"Jim is no shrinking violet. I wouldn't worry about the treatment, he'll survive."

"I know but-"

"But you're a guide and a guide doesn't like to bad mouth sentinels," she answered glaring at the three GCG members before settling back and opening a newspaper to the crossword puzzle. She smiled when Blair leaned over to point to 1 across and give her the answer.

An hour later, the group left the room, Megan stating rather loudly, "I think we are all in agreement. Sentinels need to obey their guides."

"Yes, but we need legislation that requires them to do it," Blair countered, just as loudly. "I'll draft some memos about it."

The group split up, the undercover officers escorting their charges out as Megan and Blair sauntered over to Jim who was standing in the doorway of the SGF mail office.

"Anything," Blair whispered under his breath as he came over but Jim shook his head no. Looking up, Blair glanced over Jim. "Did you sit in an office," he asked in an almost sing song voice that might be used on a nervous, young child. Jim nodded and Blair patted Jim's arm as if Jim were a pet. "Good. Let's go do some work."

The three walked out of the SGF and Megan headed for her car as Blair followed Jim to his truck. "Where to now?" he asked climbing in.

"I need to interview Irene Morgan. She wasn't home yesterday," Jim answered starting the truck. "She's a distant relative of Stone's. She had a falling out with Dr. Stone last year and I want to know why."

"Is she a member of the SGF?"

"She was but she quit."

Blair considered the statement. It certainly would raise the possibility that she could be a suspect. "Is she a sentinel or a guide?"

"A sentinel, according to Stone's sister."

"Well, I hope this turns into a good lead. I really dislike this persona I've adopted."

"What, you don't like pushing me around?" Jim sounded amused.

"I like pushing Jim Ellison around just fine, but the guide in me has a lot of trouble mistreating a sentinel. It creates something of an internal conflict."

"I guess if a guide were bonded, it would be near impossible to do this kind of undercover work."

"No, it would be easier because the guide would be tapped into the sentinel's emotions and would know just how far to push without upsetting the sentinel."

"I see. And that kind of connection would require you to bond."

"And you to bond," Blair answered softly. "And I know you don't want to."

Jim was silent for a few moments and then sighed. "I might be having second thoughts about the whole bonding issue," he admitted.

"You're interested in bonding?" Blair turned wide blue eyes on Jim as he tried to keep from shouting his excitement.

"Life's been a lot easier with you around," Jim admitted, quickly glancing at Blair and then back at the road. "It's nothing like the experiences I had with Ventriss."

"Ventriss wasn't a guide, I am." Blair paused and glanced over Jim's muscular form. "What kind of bond would...would you want? I mean I'm amenable to uhm...to either a...uhm-"

"Chief," Jim laughed, cutting him off. "If you can't say sexual bond, I don't think you're ready for one."

"Sexual bond," Blair answered immediately, leaving no doubt that's what he wanted. "I just wasn't sure that was what you would want."

Jim glanced over at Blair. "I want," he answered. "But we have logistics to work out and we need to finish this case. Sentinels and guides in the PD are required to take a week's bonding leave. I want this case gone before I take the week."

Blair reached out and rested a hand on his sentinel. "Okay, we work out everything after this case is done." Silently, Blair prayed the case would be resolved soon. He couldn't wait to bond with his sentinel.

Jim nodded his agreement as they pulled up before Irene Morgan's building. Getting out and going into the building where Irene Morgan lived, Jim knocked and identified himself. A minute later, the door opened and Irene Morgan stood in the doorway, looking over Jim's badge. "Ms. Morgan, I'm Detective Ellison, this is my partner, Blair Sandburg. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Is this about Dr. Stone?" she asked and Jim nodded.

"I'm the investigating officer and I'd like you to answer some questions."

Opening the door wider, she beckoned them in and they followed her to the living room where she offered them seats. "What kind of questions? I haven't spoken to Dr. Stone in more than a year. We had a philosophical disagreement."

"About the guide's role in a sentinel's life?" Blair cut in.

"Yeah," she nodded. "My ex-boyfriend, Peter Brooks, was part of a group he had formed. They all believed a guide should have control over a sentinel. Peter," she added, her voice turning sour, "wasn't much of a guide, but he wanted to be my guide. When I told him I liked him as a boyfriend but not as a guide, he told me about the group and that he and the SGF would soon get to choose who I bonded with. I confronted my cousin and I haven't spoken to him or Peter since."

"How did your cousin react to the confrontation?" Jim asked.

"He huffed and puffed like some big shot. He wanted to pat me on the head and tell me he would take care that I was well treated by my guide. He thought that would make everything okay. And Peter was downright nasty. He said things that I won't repeat." She sighed and shook her head. "I think I cried for two days straight. Not so much because I lost Peter but because of what he thought of me."

"Did you tell anyone about your cousin's plans?" Jim asked.

"My girlfriend, Marie Caber. She couldn't believe what the SGF was doing. She said she'd never heard such nonsense at the SGF and she's been working in the file room for three years. She said forget about it, it would never go anywhere. We shared a lot of chocolate ice cream and Bailey's for the next couple of nights."

Blair nodded sympathetically as Jim continued. "Can you tell me where you were yesterday and the day before?"

"Am I a suspect?" Irene asked, her voice rising in surprise.

"It is a standard question and the PD's way of eliminating you."

"Oh, okay," she smiled nervously. "Actually, I was at an educational conference in Seattle."

Jim nodded and stood. "Thank you for your time." He handed her his card. "If you think of anything that might be pertinent to your cousin's death, please call."

Outside, Jim walked to the truck and climbed in, starting the engine, and heading up the street. As he rounded the corner, Blair glanced over. "She's lucky she got rid of Peter Brooks," Blair said and Jim agreed. "So, are we going back to Rainier to talk with Marie Caber?"

"You know, Sandburg, you make a pretty good detective. That's exactly where we are heading. Marie Caber knew about the plans and worked in the file room. She could easily send out those threatening notes and she'd be in a position to see what was going on without anyone noticing her. And if she didn't do it, which," Jim admitted, "is equally possible since she knew about Stone's plans for a year, she may have spoken to someone about Dr. Stone's plans." Jim indicated his cellphone resting on the seat between them. "Call in and tell Simon what's going on and ask him to have someone run a check on Marie Caber. Among other things, I'd like to know if she has a gun permit."

Blair nodded, picking up the phone and punching in the speed dial number for Simon.

Chapter 23

Marie Caber looked up, the interoffice mail still in her hand, when Jim Ellison called out her name. She glanced at the badge Jim was displaying and then at the pair of men. "Yes?" she asked, curiously.

"I'm Detective Ellison, this is Blair Sandburg. We're investigating the death of Dr. Stone. We'd like to ask you a few questions?"

She glanced at the mail cart. "I have to deliver the mail. "

"Please, if we don't talk here you will have to come to the PD," Jim answered, letting the answer, and the threat, hang in the air.

After a moment and another glance at the mail cart, she nodded.

"Did you know Dr. Stone?" Jim asked, watching her closely.

"Not well. I mean, I did deliver mail to his office, but nothing beyond that."

"Did you know Mark Klock?"

"The student that was shot," she stated and shook her head.

"Tell me, Ms. Caber, do you own a gun?"

"A gun, NO. You can't think I killed those men."

"These are standard questions," Jim explained, softening his tone. "Can you tell me where you were two days ago?"

"Here," she answered, waving a hand at her cart. "This is where I work."

"Of course," Jim smiled, hoping to set the woman at ease. "We know Irene Morgan told you about Dr. Stone's plans. Could you have mentioned those plans to someone else?"

"No. I mean I don't like to speak badly of the dead, but I think he, and that ex-boyfriend of Irene's are...were both idiots," she paused, blushing at the statement. "But I wouldn't say anything that would upset Irene. We're friends, I wouldn't betray her confidence that way."

Jim seemed to consider this for a moment and then asked, "Have you noticed anything odd when you've delivered the mail?"

"Odd?"

"Weird letters or an unusual amount of mailings by one person?"

"Everyone tosses the mail down the mail chutes. I sort it in the mailroom with the other clerks and deliver it. I don't see who sends it unless they stop me on the way to the mailroom and hand it to me. No one's done that lately."

Jim nodded and Blair gave her a friendly smile as he put a hand on Jim's arm, indicating he wanted to ask a question. "Ms. Caber," Blair said keeping his voice friendly. "I know working around the offices, you must get to hear things. Could you have overheard anyone discussing Dr. Stone's plans?"

Marie Caber frowned and then nodded. "I didn't hear anything about the plans, but Dr. Stone was going to have some kind of meeting about it, soon. I heard him talking about it to Mark Klock while I was delivering mail. I mean, I wasn't really paying attention and they stopped talking when they noticed me."

Blair nodded as Jim produced his business card, handing it to her. "Here's my card - if you think of anything, please give me a call."

"I will," she turned back to her cart as Jim led Blair out of the room and made a detour to his office to grab some paperwork before heading to the car. "She didn't do it," Blair said.

"You don't think so?" Jim challenged, pulling into traffic.

"No, I don't," Blair answered, sounding sure.

"Neither do I," Jim admitted. "So, now we get to go back to the PD and reanalyze all our info, adding the new information we've learned. And I want to see if forensics has gotten anything off Dr. Stone's personal computer. By now, the tech department should have analyzed it."

“Right,” Blair agreed, watching the scenery as Jim drove towards the PD, his mind on the encounter with Marie Caber. Finally, he turned back to Jim. “I noticed you were watching her very closely. Were you using your senses to tell if she was lying?”

“Yes and no,” Jim answered. “I have always had to keep my senses down because I don’t have a guide, so I was watching her body language. You’d be amazed what body language shows.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. Really, when a sentinel uses his or her senses, all they’re doing is noticing changes to body language on a deeper level. I know we’re not going to discuss bonding until the case is over, but I could you help you with those senses if you wanted to use them.”

“Thanks, if I want to use them, I’ll let you know,” Jim answered pulling into the PD garage.

“It would help you,” Blair suggested.

“Chief, just having you beside me has been a help. With you at my side, I haven’t had any headaches,” he admitted and watched Blair’s face light up with a smile.

Chapter 24

Getting out and heading into the PD, Jim stopped at the forensics department and picked up a printout of the contents of Dr. Stone’s hard drive before making his way to his desk and checking for messages. Finding nothing that needed immediate attention, Jim turned and entered a conference room, Blair following him. Dividing the printouts in half Jim again told Blair to flag anything important and began looking over the printouts of files and emails.

They’d been at it for an hour when Blair looked over at Jim. “Jim,” he indicated a printout he was holding. “This is a list of some of the pairings Dr. Stone was considering.” He paused and then added, “Your name is on the list but not next to any of the guides in the GCG.”

Jim reached over and Blair handed him the list. It was a grid made up of two columns, the first was titled Guides, the second, Sentinels. There were about 20 names on the list, including all of the GCG members. Jim’s name was about a third of the way down the list with a star next to his name. He was listed next to Guide David Wilkenson. “Wilkenson,” Jim said the name out loud, thoughtfully. “I believe that’s Mel Wilkenson’s son.”

“Mel Wilkenson, as in Wilkenson Tower,” Blair asked.

“A business partner of my father’s,” Jim clarified, again glancing over the list. “Well, at least I know who my father was planning on pairing me with. It doesn’t surprise me. So, Dr. Stone wanted to be in charge of picking the pairs. He was either going to sell pairings and make himself a fortune or he was one pompous ass. Who was he pairing you with?”

“I’m not on this list at all. I guess I don’t have the kind of pull to be noticed and I can safely say, he was a pompous ass.”

Shaking his head, Jim rose and walked over to a white board picking up an erasable marker.

Writing Dr. Stone's name at the top, beneath it he wrote the GCG and below that Mark Klock. "Maybe, we're thinking about this wrong," Jim said as Blair joined him.

"Wrong?"

Jim pointed to the board. "We've been working under the assumption that this is a case of someone out to get the GCG. What if it is something about Stone, something more personal?"

Blair looked at the board and frowned and then back at the list he had handed to Jim just moments before. Picking up a marker, he wrote Irene Morgan and then drew a line to both to Dr. Stone and Mark Klock. "I noticed Mark Klock was listed as the prospective guide next to Irene Morgan on Dr. Stone's list."

Jim nodded and added Peter Brooks, drawing a line from Stone to Brooks, and to Irene Morgan. "I think I need to have an interview with Peter Brooks."

"He's in protective custody with the rest of the GCG."

"Yeah, I think I'll have him brought to the PD for a chat."

Chapter 25

Blair, Jim and Simon Banks stood outside interrogation room four watching Peter Brooks through the one way glass. The young man was sitting at the table, his fingers tapping restlessly on the table.

"So you think he killed Stone and Klock," Simon commented watching the young man.

"Maybe," Jim shrugged. "He is a common link between the murders and Stone was going to pair his ex-girlfriend with Klock. This could have been a case of jealousy."

"What about the threatening letters?" Simon asked. "You think he wrote them?"

"They could be a way of diverting attention from him," Blair suggested, and added with a smile, "a red herring."

Jim grinned as Simon gave a sigh. He could already see Dr. Sandburg was going to be a handful. But glancing at Jim, Simon decided, as a team, as annoying as they would be - they would be amazing and life would definitely be interesting. "We'll see what Rafe and H find. They're executing a search warrant on his apartment right now."

"He's been sitting there and stewing for an hour. I think it is time I go in and chat with him." Jim turned to the door, leaving Blair and Simon to watch.

Entering, he walked over to the table and took a seat opposite Peter Brooks. "Mr. Brooks," Jim nodded.

"Why am I here?" Peter demanded.

"We have some questions," Jim answered, sitting back and regarding Peter, Jim's blue eyes pinning Peter to his seat.

Peter waited a few minutes as Jim sat there silently. Aware that Jim was a sentinel and could read his body language, Peter tried to keep still as he waited for the detective to ask his questions. Finally, after a few moments of silence he asked, annoyance clear in his voice, "What questions? You haven't asked anything. You're just wasting my time making me sit here!"

At the outburst, Jim smiled and Peter seeing the feral smile, shuddered, his hands starting to shake, fine tremors barely visible, except to a sentinel. "How well did you know Mark Klock?" Jim asked, his voice, low and cool.

"Mark...Mark Klock, not well," Peter stammered. "We...we were both members of the GCG, so I saw him at meetings."

"You are familiar with Dr. Stone's intentions to pair sentinels with guides?"

"He had mentioned it at the meetings," Peter answered quietly, and then rallying added, "I agree with the idea. Sentinels need guides to take care of them, why shouldn't we decide who we want to take care of?"

Jim ignored the question and gave Brooks another feral smile. "Do you know who he was planning on pairing Mark Klock with?" Jim asked and mentally noted Peter rubbing his hands, nervously.

"I don't think he had made any final decisions. He was waiting to see if legislation would go through that would allow the SGF to make pairings."

"But who was he pairing Mark Klock with?" Jim demanded.

"I...I'm not sure," Peter stumbled.

"Your ex-girlfriend, Irene Morgan," Jim supplied. "I suppose that was not something you were particularly happy about."

"Why should I care?" Peter answered, sounding belligerent.

"It must have hurt, her rejecting you as a guide. You were good enough to be her boyfriend but not her guide. Stone would have known that, after all, he was her cousin."

Peter glanced up at Jim. "Dr. Stone hadn't made any decisions," he said, petulantly.

"That's not what his notes said," Jim continued, his voice sounding amused. "According to the notes, Mark Klock would pair with Irene and you," Jim shrugged. "I think the sentinel he was pairing you with really had one major enhanced sense, taste. I bet you could have done great things together." Jim didn't actually know anything about the sentinel next to Peter Brooks' name, but he doubted Peter did either. "Dr. Stone didn't think you worthy of a sentinel."

"I was a member of the GCG, he would have paired me with a real sentinel," Peter shouted, his face turning red with anger.

"I saw the names on the list. Stone didn't even think of you as a guide," Jim goaded.

"I'm a guide. I'm more of a guide than Mark Klock."

"Is that what you told Stone?"

"Yes, I told him that and..." Peter stopped, his face losing color as he realized what he had just said.

"When you confronted him in his office," Jim finished.

"I didn't say that," Peter whispered.

"You didn't have to. Did you grab the trophy in a moment of anger?"

Before Peter could answer there was a knock at the door and Simon walked in handing Jim a report. "We've just executed a search warrant on your apartment, Mr. Brooks. We found a gun that is being tested to see if it the murder weapon and, on your computer, copies of the threats sent to the GCG members."

Peter looked from Jim to Simon and back to Jim, sweat breaking out on his forehead as he realized he had been caught. "I didn't mean to kill Dr. Stone." His voice rose, becoming hysterical. "It just got out of hand. We were arguing about Irene and...and, Oh God," he moaned, putting his head in his hands.

Jim glanced at Simon who nodded going out to get someone in to tape and write up his confession.

"Why Mark Klock?"

"He was still going to try and bond with Irene," Peter whispered, his voice trembling. "She's mine."

"And the letters were to try and throw us off," Jim concluded and Peter nodded miserably. "Someone will be in to read you your rights and take your statement. You are entitled to a lawyer."

"I don't want a lawyer," Peter answered, his voice shaky. "I want this over with."

Jim stood as equipment was brought in to tape Peter's confession. Walking out, Jim moved next to Blair and watched as Peter described his fight with Dr. Stone and then his confrontation with Mark. He watched as Mark signed the confession and then turned, walking back to his desk. Blair following, looked at his own desk, and then Jim's, and instead of sitting at his own desk, pulled a chair over to Jim's. "That's what happens," Blair said, "when people who are not sentinels or guides get involved in the bonding process. It's funny, with all the political stuff connected to this case, it turned out to be a lover's triangle."

Jim nodded. "That's the way things happen sometimes. I'll type up the report and meet with the DA. But for all intents and purposes, this case is closed, Chief."

"Not exactly," Blair answered. "I've got some unfinished business. I've still got to deal with the rest of the GCG group and the fallout from Dr. Stone's actions. I'm going to make an appointment to talk with Dr. Brennan, ASAP. I want to make Dr. Brennan aware of what Dr. Stone, Chancellor Edwards, Senator Burns and Dr. Howard were planning. It has to be stopped and the Sentinel Guide Foundation has to

come out as publicly against the legislature Dr. Stone was trying to pass. And I want the GCG member's credentials as guides revoked.

"Isn't one of them still bonded?"

"Yeah, but I suspect it's not much of a bond. The Foundation will check on that and see if it is a real bond and what the sentinel wants to do."

Jim nodded his understanding and then indicated the computer. "Can we finish the reports first?"

Chapter 26

Jim and Blair knew they had things to discuss before they could actually bond. It was far too serious a matter to jump into without some discussion and arrangements, even if they knew they were compatible. Deciding to take the weekend to get 'acquainted' and work things out, after work Jim headed off to 'run some errands' while Blair went off to the Foundation to see about meeting with Dr. Brennan. Dr. Brennan, currently the sole chair of the Sentinel Guide Foundation, had cut short his attendance at a Boston conference when he heard about Dr. Stone's untimely death and had hurried back to Cascade.

Arriving at Dr. Brennan's office, Blair tied back his hair and smoothed his clothes before opening the door and smiling at Dr. Brennan's secretary. "Good afternoon." The woman looked up from some paperwork she was sorting.

"Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Sandburg. I'd like to speak with Dr. Brennan."

"Dr. Brennan just got back from a conference so he has limited time right now," she answered, her voice apologetic.

"I am aware of that but I've been working with the police in the investigation into Dr. Stone's death and I have some information to discuss with him."

"You've been working with the police?"

Blair nodded and the secretary, after considering him for a moment and nodding to herself, stood, going to the door. "I'll see if Dr. Brennan can see you. Please have a seat." She indicated the chairs across from her desk.

Blair was only waiting for about five minutes when the secretary came out and, with a smile, indicated he should enter. Blair smiled in return and entered the room, taking a quick look around as he approached Dr. Brennan.

Unlike Dr. Stone's office, Dr. Brennan's was austere. The walls were painted in muted colors that, Blair noted, wouldn't upset a sentinel, the few objects in the room, arranged in a way that wouldn't distract a sentinel. There were no crystals or shiny objects cluttering the desk and thinking back to the few times

Blair had entered Dr. Stone's office, Blair realized while Dr. Brennan's office was sentinel friendly, Dr. Stone's wasn't.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Sandburg," Dr. Brennan cut in on Blair's thoughts as he came forward and offered his hand before indicating Blair should take a seat by his desk. Taking his own seat at his desk, Dr. Brennan looked over Blair, expectantly. "I understand you want to discuss Dr. Stone and you are involved in the investigation. I'm afraid I was away when Dr. Stone...when the incident happened. I don't know how I can help you."

Blair nodded as he settled in the offered seat. "Actually, it hasn't been publicized yet, but the killer was caught today."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry but I'm not at liberty to say. The police are still tying up loose ends and I don't want to compromise the investigation. But I'm sure it will be announced very soon."

"Of course, but then how can I help you?"

"I would like to discuss something that was uncovered during the investigation. Something related to the Foundation," Blair added quickly.

Raising a hand to indicate Blair should continue; Dr. Brennan sat back, expectantly.

"I know you were aware that some of Dr. Stone's policies were..." Blair searched for the right word.

"Absurd," Dr. Brennan suggested.

"Yes," Blair nodded. "Anyway, it seems he recruited a small group of like-minded individuals and began a sub group within the Foundation. Dr. Stone planned on pairing the members of this group with sentinels. All but two didn't even rate high enough to be considered guides and they all failed their psych evals."

Dr. Brennan sighed. "Please don't tell me they all received guide certification from the Foundation?"

Blair nodded, his face grim. "There's more," he added, almost apologetically. "Chancellor Edwards, Professor Howard, and Senator Burns were helping Dr. Stone with his agenda."

"So I have damage control to deal with," Dr. Brennan concluded. "I'll have to supervise Rainier's role in the Foundation and I suppose I'll have to have a private chat with Senator Burns."

"I would also suggest reviewing guide certifications and evaluations. I already know of one case where someone with money and influence was given guide certification and, since he wasn't a real guide, harmed the sentinel he was paired with."

"Do I need to do something to help the sentinel?" Dr. Brennan asked, immediately leaning forward to write a note.

"No, it's been taken care of," Blair assured. "But this has been going on for at least two years," Blair asserted. He was gratified to see a look of shock on Dr. Brennan's face. It meant he wasn't going to take the problem lightly. "I'm not sure if there were other sentinels that were manipulated and abused but there might have been. I think we need to review all the sentinel guide pairs coming out of the Foundation since Dr. Stone became co-chair." Blair hesitated and then added, "And all guides with financial ties to Rainier."

For a few moments, Dr. Brennan sat silent considering what he had heard and then shook his head sadly. "Very well," Dr. Brennan grabbed a pen and paper. "Dr. Sandburg, I'll be arranging a meeting with the senior Foundation staff for tomorrow. I hope you will be able to attend the meeting when we review the Foundation's recent policies and actions. I would like you to give us your insights."

"Of course, I'll make myself available for the meeting."

Dr. Brennan stood and offered Blair his hand. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I assure you, I will deal with it and if you give my secretary your phone number, I'll let you know what time the meeting is tomorrow."

Blair stood and took Dr. Brennan's hand. "I'm sorry I've dropped this on you so soon after your return but I didn't think this could wait."

"No, you did the right thing. The last thing the Foundation needs is a sentinel getting hurt because we certified an unqualified guide."

Chapter 27

Jim and Blair had left central booking together, Blair going to his Volvo to head to the Foundation, and Jim to his Ford truck. Having Blair stay with him, Jim knew he needed to put at least minimal supplies in the loft, especially as Blair didn't seem to appreciate the charms of Wonderburger. So, he wanted to do a beer and snack run and get some food, coffee and milk from the market. He also needed to visit a drug store and get other kinds of supplies if they were going to bond. Smiling at the idea of what could happen this weekend, Jim considered his future guide. Blair was smart, enthusiastic, and could think outside the box, a definite asset for a detective. There was still a lot they needed to talk about, but Jim was pretty sure they would work out.

Thinking over this as he made his way down the aisles of the market, automatically grabbing various foods, Jim realized he had one more errand to run. He needed to clarify Blair's role for his father so William Ellison would leave his guide alone.

Paying for the food and putting it in the truck, he turned away from the loft and towards his father's house. This was not an errand he particularly wanted to run today, but the sooner his father understood Blair's role the better.

Pulling up in front of the large Edwardian style suburban house, Jim glanced up and was immediately swamped by memories of his not so perfect childhood. Thinking back he could see himself, ten years old, his brother Stevie, seven years old, beside him. They had been close then. "Not that that lasted," Jim murmured. William Ellison, a ruthless businessman, wanted strong sons and had pitted the brothers against each other, making them compete for anything they received from him, whether it was love, attention or a gift. Mostly, the attention, the gifts and the love had been bestowed on Jim's younger brother.

His eyes roaming over the house's façade and then the well-kept lawn, Jim could see himself at sixteen mowing the lawn every Saturday during the spring, summer and early fall. Mowing the lawn was one of his chores. His father had insisted that both boys have chores. In retrospect, Jim admitted having chores was not a bad thing but his father was unreasonable when it came to scheduling the chores. Jim was expected to take care of the lawn every Saturday morning, rain or shine. His father set a time when it was to be done by and wouldn't deviate from the schedule. "You need to learn to meet deadlines no matter what it takes," he had told Jim. As a result, Jim could remember mowing the lawn in many of Cascade's frequent rainstorms. After putting away the mower and drying off with a towel in the garage, he would come into the house his clothes soaked, his hair plastered to his head, mud all over his clothes, and Stevie would turn from his Saturday morning television shows and laugh at him. At thirteen, Stevie's job was taking out the garbage. He was expected to do it every evening. He would take the bag, carefully tied up by their housekeeper Sally, and carry it into the garage and put it in the can.

Jim had once asked if he could switch the mowing job to Sunday or do it Saturday afternoon instead of Saturday morning because of a scheduled football game. William had looked over at him and stated, "The lawn will be done on Saturday morning. If you want to participate in the game, arrange your schedule accordingly." So, sometimes Jim got up very early to mow the lawn and then he'd grab some toast and head out to meet with his team.

If mowing the lawn had been the worst of the experiences than things might still have been okay. Jim accepted that everyone should have some responsibilities related to the house but William seemed to favor his younger son when it came to chores – and just about everything else. 'Little Stevie' had shown an aptitude for business and was planning to follow his father into the corporate world and William, pleased with Steven's future aspirations, took him to work, on trips, and to dinners with clients. While Jim was doing chores, Steven was often helping his dad arrange business schedules. Even that wouldn't have been so bad but Steven had begun to sneer and look down at his brother. And William, thinking Jim should learn to fend for himself, had ignored his younger son's actions. Any relationship between the brothers had ended when Steven, in a fit of anger, had taken a crowbar to William's Cobra and then blamed Jim for it, saying Jim had taken the car for a joyride and had dented it. William had believed Steven despite the fact that Jim had denied having anything to do with the dents in the cobra. It was after that Jim decided he needed out and joined the army, leaving behind his father and brother.

Steeling himself, Jim got out of the truck and walked up to the front door and knocked. After a minute William Ellison answered the door. "Jimmy," he whispered and waved a hand indicating that Jim should come in.

“Dad,” Jim answered cautiously and followed William into the living room.

“Can I get you something to drink?” William asked as Jim took a seat on the sofa.

“No thanks. I’m not going to be here long. I’m here to talk about my guide.”

“Your guide?”

“Yes, Blair Sandburg. He is going to be my guide and I don’t want you interfering.”

William paused a moment considering his son and then shook his head with annoyance before walking over to a desk and pulling out a folder. He dropped the folder on the sofa next to Jim. “Jimmy, I had that man checked out. He can’t help you move forward. He has no social standing. For God’s sake, his mother was a hippy and he is a bastard.”

Jim sighed. This was a typical response; never mind that Blair was a great guide and could support a sentinel. “Look, Dad. He is going to be my guide. We connected. I don’t need someone with more money or social status, I need a guide I can work with, not someone like Ventriss who didn’t even have guiding abilities.” Jim could see his father wince at the statement. “I’m doing what I want, where I want, working at the PD,” Jim continued. It seemed his father never understood that Jim, as a sentinel, wanted to protect his tribe. “And your scheme to pair me with a guide of your choice died with Dr. Stone. I get to choose my guide, so stay out of it.”

“Jimmy, I’m trying to help you. I can have Mel Wilkenson’s son bond with you. Think about where you can go, what you can do with those kinds of connections.”

“You’re not listening to me, Dad. That’s not going to happen. Blair will be my guide and if you want to ever see me again, get used to that.”

“Jimmy, I-”

“Stop!” Jim snapped and held up his hand. “I’m not here to argue the point. Just think about what I am telling you.” Without another word, Jim walked out.

Going to the truck, Jim got in and took a deep breath. Hopefully, his father got the message. But whether he did or not, wouldn’t make much difference because Jim planned on bonding with the energetic anthropologist. With that thought and a smile, Jim headed home.

Chapter 28

Pulling up in front of the loft some time later, he watched, an amused smile lighting his face as Blair got out of the Volvo.

“Hey, Chief,” he called, opening the Ford door. “Want to help with the groceries?”

Blair smiled and walked over. “Sure, man,” he grabbed a couple of bags and the pair entered 852 Prospect.

“How did the rest of your day go?” Jim asked as they took the elevator up to the third floor and entered the loft.

“Good. I met with Dr. Brennan and he’s calling a meeting tomorrow to deal with Dr. Stone’s policies.”

“Good,” Jim approved. “Give ‘em hell, Chief.”

Chapter 29

The next morning, Blair stretched and looked around the small bedroom he had slept in. The room was comfortable enough, if a bit small, certainly better than the warehouse he had been renting. But Blair was hoping, this coming weekend, he would be sleeping in a king size bed overlooking the whole loft with a warm sentinel beside him.

Getting up, he could smell coffee and hear Jim in the kitchen, and he grabbed a robe and headed for the bathroom. “Morning, Chief,” Jim called out. “There’s coffee in the pot. I’m heading out. I have some things to finish up before the weekend. I’ll talk to you later.” With that, Jim was gone.

Blair smiled as Jim took flight and then glanced at the time. Last night he’d had a call from Dr. Brennan and he needed to be at the Foundation for a meeting in two hours. Deciding he would need to dress conservatively, Blair found a neat pair of dark jeans, and a blue chambray shirt. After showering, shaving and tying his hair back, Blair looked in the mirror and decided to forgo his earring and the leather chain with the tribal symbol.

Dressed and ready for the meeting, he headed over to Rainier to get his notes on the so called GCG guides before making his way to Dr. Brennan’s office. Arriving, he smiled at the secretary who immediately led him to a large conference room. Walking in, Blair noted Dr. Brennan in a corner having what appeared to be an intense, if quiet, discussion with Chancellor Edwards. Dr. Buckner was getting coffee from an urn set up in the corner of the room, and Eli Stoddard was seated at the table talking with Dr. Dorn and Dr. Hayes. Dr. Hayes’ secretary, Margaret, was setting up to take notes near the head of the table.

Grabbing a cup of coffee, Blair took a seat near Eli Stoddard and waited until he finished speaking with the two Foundation doctors.

“Hello, Eli,” Blair said quietly and indicated Dr. Brennan. “That seems like an intense conversation,” he observed.

“Hello Blair. Yes, I think some facts are being explained to the Chancellor.” As Eli said this, Dr. Brennan looked over and nodded to Blair and then walked over to the table, the Chancellor following.

“Ladies and gentleman, I think, since all our time is valuable, we should get started.” Blair watched the various members of the Foundation take seats. “For the record, I want to thank Margaret for agreeing to take notes on the meeting,” he indicated the secretary. “I also want to thank Eli Stoddard, the anthropology chair, for attending. His anthropological insights into sentinel guide connections will be of

great help I am sure. Also, I want to thank Chancellor Edwards for attending.” He smiled at the woman, in what Blair would describe as a less than friendly manner.

“Getting to the matter at hand, we are all aware of the death of the Foundation co-chair, Dr. Stone. During the investigation into his untimely death, certain facts were uncovered. It has come to my attention that Dr. Stone was involved in some less than ethical practices, all under the auspices of the Foundation.”

Looking around the room, Blair watched the various reactions. Both doctors Dorn and Hayes looked surprised, Dr. Buckner was looking at Blair and nodding, Dr. Stoddard showed no surprise and Chancellor Edwards was finding the table of great interest.

“What kinds of unethical practices?” Dr. Hayes asked.

Dr. Brennan turned to Blair. “Dr. Sandburg has been helping the police with the investigation. Perhaps he should explain.”

Nodding, Blair stood and taking a deep breath filled the group in on Dr. Stone’s personal agenda, the emergence of the GCG, and the accrediting of unqualified guides. It took about ten minutes to go over the information and when Blair finished he took his seat and looked around.

“I’ll need the information on those guides,” Dr. Dorn said, her voice soft. “I will be reviewing their psych evals.”

“And I’ll need the information as well,” Dr. Hayes added. “I will institute a review of all guides credentials. I may be asking some to retest. Any guide that refuses will lose their guide status.” Dr. Hayes glanced at his secretary. “Margaret, I’ll need you to pull up records. Priority will be given to bonded pairs, especially ones experiencing problems, and anyone accredited by Dr. Stone.”

Margaret nodded as Dr. Brennan looked over at Chancellor Edwards. “Chancellor Edwards, going forward Rainier will have to submit all guide evals and tests for review before a guide is accredited.”

“What? Rainier never harmed any sentinel by supplying an inferior or unqualified guide.”

“That’s not true,” Blair challenged.

“Oh, you know a sentinel that was harmed?” Edwards sneered, her voice turning shrill.

“Jim Ellison,” Blair answered. “Rainier supplied him with Brad Ventriss as a guide. Probably because Ventriss and Ellison’s father were big contributors to Rainier with deep pockets and Ventriss had no guiding ability. It’s fortunate he didn’t kill Jim Ellison.”

“And you know this how?”

“Jim’s decided to give bonding a second chance, with me. And this time there’s no bonding drugs making him choose.” Three of the doctors gasped at the statement. Bonding drugs were only used in extreme emergencies when a sentinel had lost a guide, was hospitalized, and zoned so badly he or she was dying.

“Congratulations, Blair.” Eli smiled as Chancellor Edwards opened and closed her mouth.

"That was an unfortunate accident," she said at last.

"I'm sure it was," Dr. Brennan cut in. "But we are going to make sure no more accidents happen. It is fairly obvious Dr. Stone was trying to curtail sentinels' rights. The Foundation will have no part in any such action. And I will be discussing this with Senator Burns. I have made an appointment to see him on Thursday. It seems with the death of Dr. Stone, he canceled a meeting with Dr. Stone and you, Chancellor Edwards." Dr. Brennan raised an eyebrow looking over her and practically daring her to say something. When she wisely kept her mouth shut, he turned back to the others. "I doubt there will be any more talk of legislation giving guides control of sentinels when Senator Burns hears we will not support him in this." Dr. Brennan turned and glared at Chancellor Edwards. "I expect," he continued in a stern voice, "that Rainier will add its voice to that of the Foundation."

"Of course," the chancellor ground out.

"Good, now that we understand one another, let's discuss what structures and routines we can put in place to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again."

Chapter 30

Blair was cooking dinner when Jim walked in at six that evening. "Hey, Chief," he called out while hanging up his jacket.

"Hey Jim, I got home early from Rainier and decided to cook dinner." He indicated the tray of lasagna. "I'll put it in the oven and you'll have time to relax and have a beer before dinner."

"Thanks," Jim answered, taking a seat in the living room and watching as Blair moved about the kitchen before coming over with two beers and taking a seat beside him. "How was your meeting?"

"It was good," Blair answered. "Dr. Brennan backed Chancellor Edwards into a corner. She's going to have to come out in support of reevaluating guides and against any legislation that would limit sentinels' rights. As a matter of fact, Dr. Brennan offered me a job as watchdog of the Foundation."

Jim paused in lifting the beer to his lips and looked over at Blair. "What did you tell them?"

"That my plate was full, what with teaching anthropology, working as a Foundation liaison at the PD and with a sentinel."

"If you want to-" Jim didn't get to finish as Blair put a finger over his lip.

"Sentinel, liaison and anthropology. There are others to keep an eye on the Foundation, though I did agree to be on a legislation review committee along with Dr. Stoddard, Dr. Brennan and Chancellor Edwards. Whenever new legislation about sentinels and guides is proposed, we will meet to review it before Foundation and Rainier recommendations are made. It helps keep Edwards and her political games in check. Anyway, I think Dr. Hayes wants to take up the watchdog role. She's the head of guide

training and was furious that people with no guide ability had been passed through as guides. She compared it to giving someone a surgeon's certification without any medical school training."

"What about the GCG members?"

"Certification has been pulled pending retesting and based on what I saw of their scores, they won't pass."

"What about the ones that were bonded?"

"Well, Dennis Greene's sentinel broke the bond."

"So?"

Blair paused at the question, remembering Jim had 'supposedly' broken his bond with Ventriss. "Jim, when a sentinel and guide have a real bond, breaking it is a painful, sometimes even fatal, process. I know you broke a bond with Ventriss, but believe me, it wasn't a bond. If it had been, at the very least you and Ventriss would have been hospitalized. Anyway, the other bonded guide, Eddie Rugges, his sentinel will be interviewed and given some options. The Foundation will support the sentinel with whatever she decides to do."

Jim nodded his understanding. "What about us and bonding?"

Blair smiled. It was Friday night and they did say they would work out bonding this weekend. He'd deliberately put the idea out of his mind, meditating at several points during the day to keep calm while waiting for Jim to bring it up. Giving Jim a 60 watt smile, Blair took a deep breath and switched over to lecture mode. It wasn't so much that Blair wanted to lecture about bonding, but he acknowledged Jim had to be fully informed before making a decision. "There are two kinds of bonds and several levels of bonding," he began softly.

"Yeah, sexual and non-sexual," Jim answered.

"Yes," Blair agreed. "But in each of those categories there are levels. In non-sexual bonding the sentinel imprints the guide on his senses. He will listen to the guide's breathing and heartbeat, he will look over the guide, examining any and all features. The guide is usually naked and..." Blair paused, seeing Jim get ready to speak. "Ventriss didn't do that?" he asked, and Jim shook his head. Blair nodded, then shook his head with a sigh.

"Anyway, the sentinel touches the guide, his face, his chest, various places to get the feel of the guide. He smells the guide, usually at the neck and licks the guide's neck to get the taste of the guide. While this is going on, the guide is reading and imprinting the sentinel's emotions. As I said, this happens at various levels. The deeper the imprinting by sentinel and guide, the stronger the bond. Ventriss was no guide so he couldn't have imprinted your emotions. You may have imprinted him but he didn't imprint you, so no bond was ever formed."

Blair paused. "Why don't we eat and then I'll explain the sexual bond?" Jim nodded and moved to the table, making quick work of setting the table and dishing out the food. As they sat, Blair continued. "A sexual bond, by its very nature, is a deeper bond because body fluids are shared. But again, there are

levels depending on how far the sentinel imprints the guide and how deep the guide goes reading the sentinel. And before you ask, a guide can tell when a sentinel reaches a point where he doesn't want the guide to go further.

"In a soul bond, which is the deepest level there is, the sentinel and guide become one soul occupying two bodies. It's the rarest kind of bond, only one pair in a hundred thousand reach a soul bond. At that level, they are linked for life and if one dies, the other will follow into the next life."

Blair paused and looked over to see if Jim had any questions. Jim was watching him carefully and Blair was thinking about the matter very seriously. "How do we know what kind of bond we will have?"

"No one actually knows how sentinels and guides connect or why some bonds are deeper than others. That's supposedly what Dr. Stone was trying to figure out. There is a theory that if the bond is going to be deeper, both parties will know, almost from their first meeting that they should be together, but beyond that, the only way to see how deep the bond goes, is to bond."

"Since we're choosing a sexual bond that means ours will be deeper?"

"Definitely deeper than non-sexual," Blair agreed, smiling.

Jim nodded. "What happens after bonding?"

"Since we are contemplating a sexual bond, we would need to live together. We could find a place together or--"

"You could move in here with me?"

"That would be a possibility," Blair agreed. "We'd have to work out a schedule so I could help you out in the field."

"You would still be able to do stuff at Rainier?"

"Sure. Rainier and the Foundation are both committed to accommodating sentinels and guides and recognize there can be scheduling issues. They do try to accommodate that kind of thing. I'll be able to work out a schedule."

"The PD will require that you sit through certain courses on procedure. They're not difficult. Ventriss passed them. That will earn you an observer's pass. If you wanted to be more involved than that, you would need to attend academy classes and take weapons training."

"Man, I'm good with the observer thing and helping you but I am so not into guns."

Jim laughed. "It would mean when something goes down, you would have to stay in my truck and call for backyard."

"Oh sure, not a problem," Blair agreed, as they cleaned up the remains of the dinner.

Jim looked over Blair, not so sure that would not be a problem but there were other matters to settle.

"Are you sure you want this Sandburg? You're still young. Wouldn't you want a wife, a family?"

"If *WE* wanted a family...we could go the surrogate, insemination route. Because I'm telling you Ellison, I don't share what's mine and when we bond, you're mine."

"And are you mine?"

"Oh, yeah."

Jim smiled at the enthusiastic response. "Maybe I should kiss you."

"Maybe you should," Blair agreed, leaning close.

Jim reached up and gently caressed Blair's cheek, and then leaned in close. "I have never kissed a man before," Jim whispered his lips just above Blair's.

"There's a first time for everything," Blair whispered and closed the distance between them, his lips brushing Jim's before Jim cupped the back of Blair's head, deepening the kiss. By the time they pulled apart, both were breathing heavily.

"Did you feel that?" Blair whispered.

"A tingling?"

"That's step one of a deep bond."

"How do we get to step two?"

"We go upstairs and explore each other's bodies," Blair answered, leaning in for another kiss before holding out his hand.

Jim looked at the hand, then at Blair. He hadn't known Blair very long but something inside him felt very right about this and he took the hand and led Blair upstairs.

Once in the bedroom, Blair reached to unbutton his shirt but Jim stopped him. "Let me?" he asked and Blair nodded with a smile. Jim let his hands move over Blair's chest, feeling the muscles and curly hair beneath the cloth. "You have a nipple ring," he noted and opened the buttons of the shirt revealing Blair's chest.

Jim let his hands run down Blair's chest before sliding the shirt off. In the back of Blair's mind, he recognized that Jim's sentinel instincts were taking over and imprinting him as the sentinel reached for his pants. Touch, scent and taste were engaging. Reaching to grab Jim's hands, Blair stopped the sentinel. "Before you finish undressing me, will you undress for me?" he asked, knowing Jim would become focused on the imprinting as the sentinel recognized his guide. He wanted Jim naked so they could link together.

Nodding, Jim pulled off his shirt, tossing it onto the bureau before toeing off his shoes and removing his belt. As he reached for the button on his pants, Blair caught his hands. "Slow down, I want to enjoy this." Jim smiled and watched as Blair slowly unbuttoned the pants, and then let them drop to the floor. Blair, watching Jim, couldn't help but admire the sculpted body, the washboard stomach, and the muscles as Jim's boxers joined his pants, and his penis, already hard, stood to attention. "Damn, you are beautiful,"

Blair whispered as Jim's boxers hit the floor. Sitting on the bed, his legs spread, his eyes on Blair, Jim removed his socks and leaned forward, again reaching for Blair's pants and Blair moved closer so Jim could finish undressing him.

Dropping Blair's pants and boxers, Jim ran a hand down Blair's stomach and over his cock, feeling the guide tremble at the light touch. "Not as beautiful as you, my guide."

Blair smiled and moved to the bed, his arms encircling Jim. "Bond with me, sentinel," he invited and leaned back, pulling Jim with him so Jim had access to his body.

The sentinel in Jim took over and he began touching and tasting his guide, Blair's moans of pleasure adding to the sentinel's pleasure.

Jim's senses opened fully and he mapped Blair's body, getting to know it better than his own before he reached down and let his hands close over both hard shafts, rubbing them both, his body starting to thrust.

Blair's hands joined his as they moved together, both panting as their pace quickened and their bodies peaked. Crying out, both came, the guide's empathy soaring, the sentinel's mental barriers dropping so the guide could enter. At the same time, Blair could see two animals, one a wolf and the other a black jaguar, leaping into each other, a brilliant white light enveloping them. Both soared, Jim's senses eclipsing everything but the guide, Blair's empathy washing over and seeping into all the corners of the sentinel's mind.

Finally separating, Jim rolled over to lie next to Blair. "That was amazing," he whispered.

Blair nodded, his mind going over the two animals that had appeared as they bonded. "Did you see the animals?" he asked.

"Yeah. The jaguar is my animal spirit so I guess the wolf is yours."

Blair, still barely able to move, turned his head to look at his partner, taking in the sweaty, unkempt figure and deciding he had never seen anyone more beautiful. "You know your animal spirit?"

"When I was in Peru I was online and the Chopec shaman showed me my animal spirit."

"You were online in Peru?" Blair repeated.

Jim nodded. "They went dormant when I was rescued."

"Have you ever seen your spirit animal since?"

"Not till today."

Blair decided this was something he would think about later, and smiling he rolled over, so his body came to rest against his sentinel's. He could feel Jim pleased with the move. "You realize this was more than a bond," he whispered as his hand came to rest on Jim's chest, just over his heart. "This is a soul bond."

