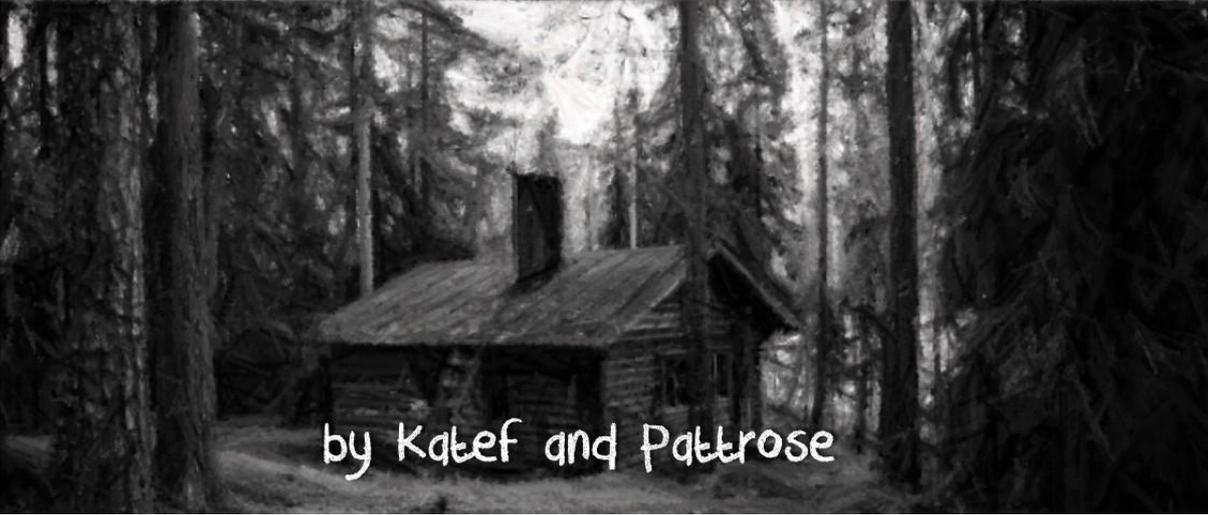




Absence



Makes



by Katef and Pattrose

“Absence Makes...?”

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Introduction: Blair:

“Well, shit, dammit, and WTF!” a drenched and bedraggled Blair Sandburg muttered furiously between chattering teeth as he gazed around him with bleary eyes, trying to make sense of his present predicament. It wasn't so much that the young man was particularly angry at the weather – Hell, it was Cascade and the Pacific North West after all – but why the heck he should be out in it, and down at the dockyards too, by the looks of it. Because he had absolutely no recollection of getting here, and no reason he could think of for being alone and huddled in the doorway of a dilapidated warehouse; freezing his butt off in a downpour and without a coat.

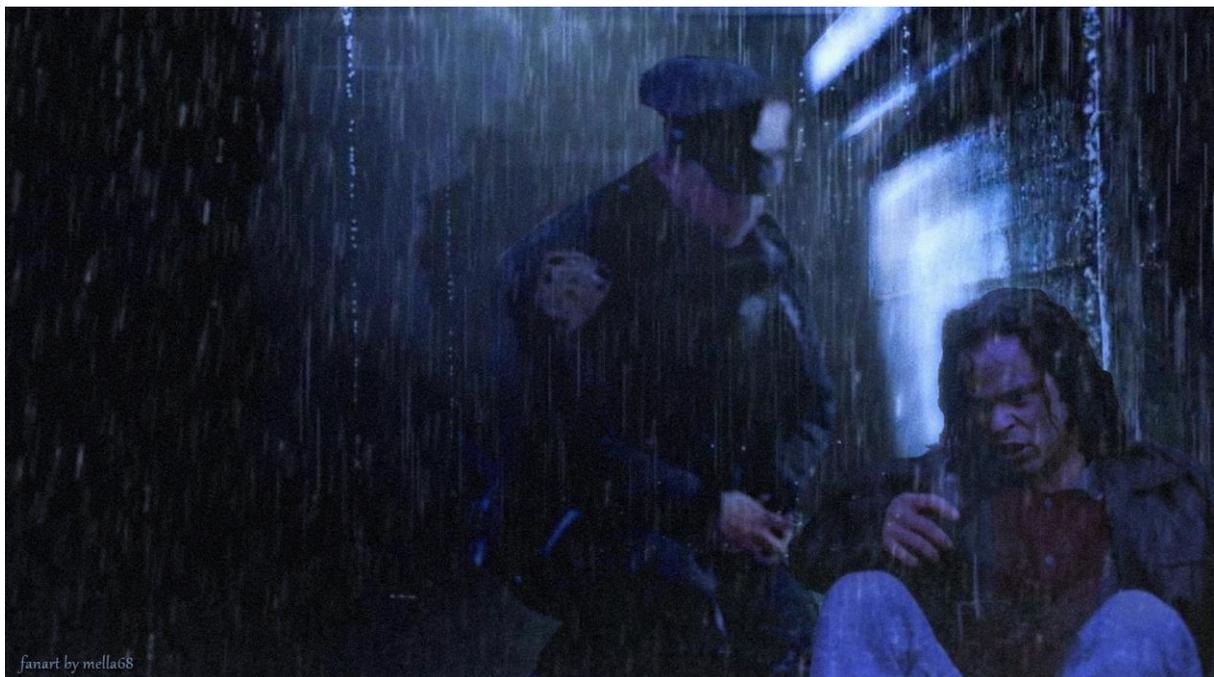
So why *was* he alone; and where was Jim? Where was his partner, roomie, the secret love of his life and erstwhile subject of his ill-fated Sentinel diss? The last thing he remembered was enjoying a beer together back at the loft, having just closed a difficult and very disturbing case most satisfactorily. And after that, nothing. Nothing came to mind at all.

“Dammit, Jim, you've got some 'splainin' to do,” he growled irritably as he slowly hauled himself to his feet, wavering unsteadily for a moment until his muzzy head and blurred vision cleared a little. “Gotta get to the PD. Gotta see what's going on. And it had better be good!”

He didn't dare think that Jim might be hurt, or that there was any ominous reason behind his partner's absence. Better to hold onto his anger and affront at having been apparently left here by mistake.

Pushing himself away from the slight protection offered by the shabby building, he began to walk slowly towards where he believed the nearest public road might be, hugging his torso in an effort to retain some smidgen of remaining body heat, and concentrating on simply putting one foot in front of the other without falling flat on his face.

He wasn't sure how far or how long he'd been walking, when suddenly his plodding progress was halted abruptly by a hand on his shoulder.



“And just where do you think you're going, son?” a gravelly voice demanded, and he peered myopically up into the stern and forbidding visage of a very large cop.

“Oh, mmmm my, am I g g glad to ssssee you!” Blair managed to stutter out from between his clenched teeth, too cold to be fazed by the disbelieving grimace on the big uniform’s face.

“B B Blair S S Sandburg. C C Consultant to M M MCU, Central precinct.”

Under different circumstances he might have been wryly amused at the way his information was received, with the cop’s expression changing abruptly to a warm grin. Turning to beckon his partner, who was standing vigilantly beside the black and white that Blair belatedly noted had pulled up close by, his rescuer called out, “S’OK, Mike, I recognise him now. This is the guy in the APB. Dr Sandburg. Let’s get him back to his department, shall we?”

And with blessings on their heads, Blair climbed gratefully into the back of the unit, even managing to dredge up a shaky smile and a word of thanks as the officer driving cranked up the heating for him and passed him a pouch containing an insulating survival blanket from the First Aid kit.

Meanwhile, at Cascade Central PD Major Crimes Unit; Simon Banks’ office:

Jim:

Prowling around his boss’s office like a large, predatory cat, Jim Ellison’s glowering expression bore testament to his emotional state. Anxiety and anger warred in roughly equal measures as he paused for a moment to stare out into the stormy darkness outside, his over-active imagination conjuring up images of his partner and best friend somewhere out there suffering in the biting cold and rain.

“Come on, Jim. Sit down, man. I’m sure we’ll hear something soon. He’s probably just gotten himself lost, trying to find his way back from wherever he’s landed up. Or been left. You know how bad his sense of direction is; at least, that’s what you’re always telling me!”

Jim glanced over his shoulder at his friend and captain, hearing the real worry in the big man’s voice even as he tried to offer his detective a little comfort through his weak attempt at dry humour.

Grimacing wryly, he replied resignedly, “Yeah, I know, Simon. But it’s actually not really true. He’s nothing like as bad as I make out. It just winds him up, is all. Long-standing joke.

“Shit, I just don’t understand it!” he snarled impatiently, slamming his clenched fist against the window frame. “*Nothing* about this whole business makes sense! And why the hell haven’t we had any response from the APB?”

“Jim, Jim! Look, it’s only been a couple hours since you called it in, man. I know you’re worried – hell, so am I – but I’m sure he’s OK. I mean, you could feel it if he wasn’t, couldn’t you? You know, from that ‘special connection’ you say you have?” And Simon couldn’t quite keep the hopeful, pleading tone from creeping into his voice and expression as he met his subordinate’s unhappy gaze.

Sighing dispiritedly, Jim glanced downwards for a moment before raising his eyes again to meet the sympathetic, dark ones Simon levelled at him.

“I don’t know, Simon. Honestly. I mean, yes, I’ve always believed that I – we – would know instinctively if either of us was in real danger, and to a certain extent that’s been true. But this time – this time there’s nothing. Neither one way nor the other. All I do know is that I have no explanation at all about what’s gone on tonight. Perhaps Blair’ll be able to shed some light on it, when we find him.

“*If* we find him....” and his voice tailed off miserably as he turned to stare out of the window again, shoulders tight and hunched in distress.

Rising to his feet, Simon walked over to stand behind his friend, a large hand squeezing Jim’s shoulder supportively.

“Come on, Jim. Come and sit down, and let’s go through this one more time while we’re waiting. Maybe something’ll occur to you while you’re running through this evening’s activities again. You never know. Some subliminal ‘sentinel sense memory’ thing?”

"That's as may be, sir, but I usually need Blair to work with me for that sort of thing. Not sure if I can do it on my own. His presence just makes everything so much easier."

Nevertheless, Jim turned reluctantly to obey, knowing that Simon was only trying to give him something to focus on, other than his overriding fear for his best friend's safety.

"OK, Simon. Why not?" he murmured, and settled back in his seat, forcing his mind back to the last thing he remembered before waking up alone and disorientated in his truck in the deserted parking lot of the Waterstone Leisure and Recreation Centre in downtown Cascade.

"Once we'd arrested and booked Masterson, and you sent us home, we went straight back to the loft. Blair was really hyped and excited about how his profile had been right on the mark, and I gotta say I was pretty happy too. And really proud of Blair's input. That perverted bastard Masterson's been a thorn in the department's side for far too long, and it's time he got what was coming to him.

"Anyhow, we decided to order in, since neither of us felt up to cooking, and we had a beer while we were waiting for a pizza to be delivered. Blair made a salad to go with it, 'cause you know how he is about getting his daily veggies, and that's the last thing I remember clearly. I mean, I sort of have the impression that the pizza was delivered, and I think we must have started eating, but that's it.

"The next thing I know is that I'm sitting in the driver's seat of the truck in the Waterstone parking lot, and that I've got the headache from hell. And you know the rest. I called you at home, you came to get me, and here we are. No sign of Blair at the loft, or here, or anywhere!"

Frowning in consternation, Simon opened his mouth to respond, when the phone rang beside him. Snatching up the handset, he barked, "Banks!" before looking up to meet Jim's anxious gaze. Tapping his ear in a tacit invitation for Jim to listen in, he concentrated on what he was being told, a slow but broad smile breaking out as he absorbed the good news.

"Thanks, Officer Rizzo. Much appreciated. Goodbye." and he replaced the handset, beaming at his equally ecstatic detective.

"He's fine, Jim. Cold, wet and miserable, to be sure, but alive. And I'm sure he'll be here with us very soon."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right Simon. Know what? I think he's already in the building. I can hear his teeth chattering from down in the lobby, and by what he's muttering to himself, I'd say he was royally pissed off!" And Jim was far too relieved to feel anything but happy anticipation as he tracked his best friend up to the bullpen, already on his feet and moving to welcome the smaller man as Blair pushed his way through the doors.

The partners shared a reconnecting and reassuring hug, for once completely uncaring about what the other occupants in the bullpen might think, then pulled back, only to demand of each other almost simultaneously, "Where were you? What's happening? Are you OK?"

Holding his smaller partner by the shoulders, Jim frowned as he quickly scanned Blair's vitals, noting his sorry condition. Blair's clothing was plainly still saturated as he shivered continuously beneath the foil survival blanket, and his hiking boots squelched as he eased his weight from foot to foot, grimacing in the discomfort due to his soggy socks. Although worn rather shorter now, his still abundant curls were mostly plastered to his head, with a few fuzzy wisps beginning to halo his pale face as they dried out. But by far the most worrying aspects as far as the Sentinel was concerned were the slightly unfocussed, glassy expression in the beautiful blue eyes as his partner tried to concentrate his attention on Jim's face. In addition there was a small but definite hitch in Blair's breathing.

Even as the few members of the department's night shift skeleton staff gathered around the pair to murmur their well wishes and express their gratitude for the young man's safe return, Simon strode over, all business as he studied Blair carefully. "OK, Sandburg. Good to see you back, son, but now you're coming with me. Jim too," he continued, the commanding tone brooking no argument from either man. "You're both going to ER to have your blood tested among other things, as we need to screen for drugs as soon as possible. And you," he added,

gazing deeply into Blair's bleary blues, "are going to have a thorough check up. I want no risk of chest infections if it can be avoided!"

Although it might have occurred to Blair to demur, Jim recognised Simon's genuine concern for what it was, since both of them were unhappily aware that Blair was much more susceptible to such infections since his drowning a few years previously. He therefore backed up his boss's demand with his own words of gentle but nonetheless inflexible insistence. "Simon's right, Chief. I can already hear a bit of a rattle in your chest, so better safe than sorry."

And for once Blair felt too cold and queasy to put up much of a fight, so he allowed Jim to turn him around and usher him out of the bullpen in Simon's wake, actually revelling in the warm, heavy arm draped protectively around his shoulders.

Early the following morning, Cascade General's ER:

Jim shifted uneasily in his seat, wincing at the stiffness that hours in the uncomfortable visitor's chair had wreaked on his tired frame. Yet it would never have occurred to him to go home; not as long as his younger partner slept on, making the most of the opportunity to get some proper rest. Although he hadn't been officially admitted, Blair had arrived so late in the night that by the time he and Jim had had blood drawn, and he had been thoroughly checked over, the attending doctor had suggested that his obviously exhausted patient get a little sleep before going home, and that's exactly what he had done. With a lot of persuasion by his concerned Sentinel also, it had to be said.

As for Jim, he had been relieved when Blair hadn't fought him too much on the issue, that in itself being a sign of the younger man's general feeling of malaise, and something which was pushing every one of Jim's BPS buttons. The combination of drugs and exposure had hit Blair hard, and Jim's Mother Hen instincts were out in force.

Scanning his sleeping friend, Jim considered what little he knew about what had happened, and more importantly, what effects it had had on both of them.

As far as he was concerned, in his opinion it wasn't too bad, unless you counted the significant emotional distress of being drugged and helpless in some unknown person's hands; which, for someone as anal as the recognised control freak known as Jim Ellison, was actually pretty unnerving.

Blair, on the other hand, appeared to have had a much worse physical reaction to the drugs, which were clearly taking their time in leaving his system. It could be just a matter of body mass – Jim being so much bigger than his younger roomie and partner. But it could also be something sentinel-related, insofar as Jim's control of his sensitivity was now so much greater than the average person's, such that he could dial down and ride out the residual effects more easily. Whatever had been used, it was nothing like the Golden Blair had accidentally ingested and Jim had been exposed to some years previously with dire effects on them both. Whatever the case, it was better for Blair to enjoy this chance to relax as much as possible and, hopefully, by the time he was ready to return to the loft, the tox screen would have been completed and they would at least know with what they had been dosed. And possibly even how it had been administered, depending on the results of the CSU's investigations.

Leaning over the gurney, Jim held his hand over Blair's sleeping form, not quite touching, but easily able to discern the changes in his partner's somewhat improved condition. Now dressed in borrowed scrubs, and cocooned in several warm blankets, Blair had finally stopped shivering, but there was a distinct rise in body temperature that had less to do with the blankets than the first signs of a low grade fever, and Jim's frown deepened as he listened to the soft but persistent wheeze that accompanied every inhalation. Yes, Blair was probably OK to return home on waking, but undoubtedly he would be supplied with yet another course of medication to fight off the possibility of yet another serious chest infection, and wouldn't *that* go down well with his independent and feisty partner! For sure, Jim sympathised with him, and would undoubtedly have to

assume his uber-protective and persuasive persona to ensure that the course was finished, but he had done it many times before, and was resigned to it.

But he was also resigned to the fact that his ingrained, deep-seated guilt would re-emerge, despite Blair's habitual frustrated imprecations to get over himself already. For Jim, it was a done deal, and had been so ever since Alex and 'the fountain'. He would never forgive himself for his reprehensible behaviour towards his Guide and friend both during that horrendous episode and for months afterwards, although he still didn't understand what had gotten into him. Blair had made all sorts of excuses for him in terms of 'sentinel imperatives', and other such implausible motives, but the fact remained that he had hurt his partner badly, and even as he had watched the young man withdraw into himself a little more each day, he just couldn't seem to stop himself.

And then there had been the 'diss-disaster'. And what a dreadful, if farcical, comedy of errors that had been! Oh yes, Blair had made mistakes, principal amongst which had been to trust his unsecured laptop with his interfering mother, but Jim knew he had reacted appallingly to the incident, thus driving his partner to commit academic suicide. The memory of Blair's distraught face as he had destroyed himself on national TV still had the ability to cause Jim's gut to clench in pain and self-disgust, despite what had been achieved later to mitigate the disaster to a great extent.

In retrospect, he could admit that the cobbled-together offer of a detective's shield would never have worked out, and it was as well that Blair himself had the common sense to see it. Yes, both Jim and Simon had been somewhat hurt and indignant when Blair had quietly refused their gift later that memorable evening, but he had definitely had the right of it. As he had patiently explained, as a self-proclaimed liar and fraud, he would never be able to take the witness stand, and if he were to stay in the loft and keep partnering Jim, it wouldn't take a genius to figure out that there was some truth in the whole 'Sentinel deal' after all, and his self-immolation would have been for nothing.

He had also added that he wasn't too happy at the prospect of carrying a gun, even if he got through the abridged academy course. But more importantly, he had pointed out that, as a cop and Jim's official partner, he wouldn't be able to do his job properly as a guide. Questioned by a sceptical Simon, he had explained that he needed to be at Jim's side to do any good, not obeying orders and entering dangerous situations where he might have to act separately, thus leaving his Sentinel without backup. The very thought of leaving Jim vulnerable was anathema to Blair even after all the hurt and misunderstandings between them, and Jim had been - and, indeed, still was - humbled by the young man's resolve.

This last argument had been the most telling, and both Simon and Jim had been forced to respect him for it.

And that was why, after prolonged discussion and heart-searching, they had come up with an alternative option which could work for them all.

Thinking back, Jim cringed inwardly as he recalled his automatic anxiety reflex when he told his friends that he had decided at last to 'man up' and reveal his secret to the Chief of Police and the Commissioner. Blair had been shocked almost speechless, and it had taken a lot of persuasion on Jim's part to convince him that it could work to their advantage, whereas Simon had merely nodded his approval. Jim knew that in his captain's opinion, it was about damn time. But when it actually happened, it wasn't nearly as traumatic as he had expected. For sure, the Chief and Commissioner were suitably impressed, especially by his demonstrations, although by mutual agreement Jim and Blair didn't reveal the true range of Jim's senses. However, any disgruntlement on their part was mostly because they had been kept in the dark for so long. And at the end of the day, they didn't want to lose their best partnership, so they were inclined to collaborate with Jim, Blair and Simon to come up with a means to mitigate the damage already done.

As he gently smoothed a few stray curls away from Blair's forehead, Jim wondered yet again whether their plan really had worked for his partner as well as Blair claimed that it did. As far as Jim was concerned, he had gotten everything he wanted in Blair's honest commitment to him and their partnership, but how much of Blair's apparent satisfaction with their situation was genuine? But perhaps it really *was* genuine, and Jim was making too much of his own fears and suspicions. It had certainly rattled a few cages, and rightly so, but overall had proved to be far less distressing for Jim than he had expected.

The first thing Jim had done was to hold his own version of a press conference, albeit in-house, during which, aided by Blair's succinct explanations, he admitted to having better than average sight and hearing. However, they both insisted that he was no Superman, and that none of his cases had ever been compromised by inadmissible evidence; a point which was backed up by the DA's office, care of an accommodating Beverly Sanchez. It was also made very clear that Blair's Sentinel dissertation had never been submitted as such, and that the press, the university and the publishers had all conspired to create such an untenable situation that he had seen no other way to divert their attention away from Detective Ellison and the PD but by telling the world that his work was fraudulent.

With the PD's blessing, Blair successfully sued Sid Graham and Berkshire Publishing for releasing his intellectual property without his consent. The out-of-court settlement wasn't huge, but enough to satisfy Blair, who wasn't inclined to push for a larger sum in case he should end up losing the lot.

The situation as regards Rainier University was more complicated, but also eventually resolved more or less to everyone's satisfaction. The Board of Governors had been forced to admit that Chancellor Edwards had acted prematurely by disseminating information regarding Blair's supposed subject matter to the press. She had also been forced to apologise for Blair's wrongful dismissal – after being threatened with prosecution on the grounds of interfering with police business. Jim was unaware of what internal investigation and castigation she had undergone in consequence, but he had learned later that she had been dismissed from her position, and in his opinion, it couldn't have happened to a better person!

On the other hand, in all honesty, Blair couldn't be re-instated to his job as a Teaching Fellow, because his absenteeism – pretty much all down to the results of his working with the PD – was inarguable. And didn't *that* add another layer to Jim's guilt complex, as he ruefully admitted to himself.

But at least, with the whole-hearted backing of his dissertation committee, he had been allowed to submit an alternative paper, and that he had done within the required timescale.

It might not have been as dear to Blair's heart as the 'Sentinel' paper, but it was more than adequate nonetheless, and Jim snickered wryly as he recalled how Blair had once told him he had had enough data for several papers. He just hadn't wanted to stop riding with Jim and climb off the rollercoaster and back onto the academic merry-go-round.

So a paper was duly submitted concerning the role of Forensic Anthropology and its Application within the PD, and the newly-fledged Dr Sandburg became eminently suitable to be hired by the PD as a consultant.

Bearing all this in mind, Jim still wondered how they really were as a partnership. True, even though it was more of an open secret now, nearly everyone in the PD believed that Jim did actually have an edge, and that Blair was an integral part of it. And most of their colleagues and friends in Major Crimes knew it for a fact, although it was their secret, and not to be shared with the general public. As for their opinion of Blair, admittedly there had been a few who had considered him criminally negligent in allowing his paper to be compromised in the first place, but who still admired his willingness to fall on his sword in defence of his partner. And as time passed and the whole dissertation debacle was consigned to history, he was accepted for what he was, and for what he achieved, both in terms of backing Jim up and assisting other departments as required; his outgoing and friendly personality usually, given the chance, winning over anyone but the most misanthropic individuals.

But all that notwithstanding, Jim still felt uneasy. Unsatisfied with the status quo as it existed in its present form between them.

Carefully studying Blair's sleeping face, he took the time to really absorb the beard-stubbed pallor and sunken, bruised-looking eye sockets, unhappily noting that even in repose, Blair looked less than peaceful. And it wasn't just because of his present physical condition either, of that Jim was certain. And he couldn't for the life of him remember when he had last really *looked* at his partner and roomie outside of an instinctive scan as a protective sentinel towards his guide after a potentially dangerous situation in the field.

At the loft they rubbed along comfortably like two confirmed bachelors, or an old married couple without the sex. Jim hadn't bothered with dating in ages, and couldn't remember the last time Blair had either. 'Table-leg

Sandburg' hadn't been in evidence for years now, if indeed he had actually existed, and wasn't just a figment of Jim's imagination and admittedly caustic humour.

So why weren't they together in all ways? Or failing that, why hadn't they made any effort to find another lasting relationship? Hell, Jim was well aware that Blair was an attractive man – more than simply 'cute'. And he was pretty sure Blair wasn't completely indifferent to him. Back in the early days of their partnership, he had picked up enough whiffs of pheromones to suggest that Blair had had at least a passing interest in Jim. But time and circumstances had taken their toll, and now it was what it was. They had been together now platonically for a good seven years, and for the most part it worked OK.

But Goddess, how Jim wished for something different now. Something new and exciting. And that new and exciting 'something' would only come to pass if it included Blair, of that he was sure. Talk about a wacky version of the 'seven year itch'!"

However, before he could consider that perplexing concept any further, his train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of a tired and worn-looking Simon Banks, here to check up on his best team and to update them with his latest information.

Part 1: "Curiouser and curiouser" cried Alice:

Pulling over a spare chair, Simon placed it next to Jim's and sat down with a heavy sigh of relief. As he visibly relaxed, he tilted his head back for a few moments, eyes closed as he took a bit of time to compose himself. However, it wasn't long before he opened his eyes again, and studied Blair's still sleeping form for a while before turning his attention to Jim.

"So, Jim, how's he doing? I mean, *really* doing? The doc's just filled me in on his general condition, and told me he'll be good to go as soon as he wakes up, but I'd rather hear it from you. What do you think?"

"Truthfully? Probably not as well as the medics would like to think, Simon. I can hear him wheezing already, and he looks, well, run down? Thinner than he should be? And how could I not notice it? I mean, I *live* with the guy! But he's been his usual cheerful self, at least superficially. Working at full speed ahead, but when has he not? Dammit, if he's been doing his 'let's not worry Jim' thing again, as soon as he's well enough, I'm going to bawl him out! And then I'll take him on holiday to somewhere warm," he added, his expression morphing from irritation to affection as he reached over to pat Blair's blanket-covered knee.

"But all that aside, what have you found out about the drugs? Have the Forensics team turned up anything?"

Offering his friend and subordinate an understanding nod and half-smile, Simon absorbed Jim's information, then turned his attention back to the case in hand.

"Well, as to the drugs, Jim, the techs have pulled out all the stops to get a result a.s.a.p., and you're not going to like it, I'm afraid. Both of you ingested a derivative of some sort of designer date-rape drug; something that in the right dose would make you compliant and cooperative. And as you know, you'll both probably suffer from some level of amnesia, more's the pity.

"Anyhow, the drug was administered on the pizza, but there we have a problem. From what we've already ascertained, the pizza restaurant and the delivery boy are almost certainly innocent of any wrong-doing, unless you count naïveté and greed on the part of the delivery boy. According to the boy, when he arrived at 852, a youngish man, who looked not unlike Sandburg, met him at the entrance and took the pizza boxes from him. The guy claimed that the order was for you both, so gave the boy the payment, plus a good tip and let him go. So whoever it was had plenty of time to doctor the pies before delivering them to your door. And I suspect he was nondescript enough not to raise your suspicions, huh?"

Rubbing his face wearily with his hands, Jim sighed deeply as he looked up again to meet Simon's inquisitive gaze, his self-deprecation clear in his distressed expression.

"You're right, Simon. I mean, I paid for the pizzas at the door, and all I can say is that the guy looked like a regular delivery guy. He was average height and weight, had a baseball cap pulled down low over his brow, and casual

clothing, and if he had long or curly hair it was tucked into the cap, so I couldn't tell you the colour or style. Tell the truth, I wasn't concentrating at all. Guess I was just too tired.

"And I feel like shit now as Blair got hurt because I wasn't on top of my game."

"Oh, come on, Jim! Enough already of the self-condemnation! You know what Blair would say, don't you? And he'd be right. You *aren't* Superman, and no one can be expected to be on top of their game 24/7. Cut yourself some slack, and let's just concentrate on finding out what we can.

"I suspect you'll want to go over the loft again as soon as you and Blair are released, and maybe you'll find something the CSU missed. But I have to say that they really did go through it as well as they could, knowing that it was your place, and thanks to Sentinel OCD, the only fingerprints they found were yours and Blair's. So when the guy or guys came back once you two were out of it, they didn't leave any traces."

Jim was about to reply when both their attention was caught by a drowsy murmur from the gurney, and they looked over to see a pair of sleepy blue eyes regarding them from a frowning young face.

"Thanks, Simon," Blair muttered raspily. "For the information and for telling it like it is to Mr Guilt-fest over there. Maybe he'll take it from you better than from me that he's allowed to be off-duty sometimes. Even a Sentinel needs down-time, and this WAS NOT YOUR FAULT!" he growled, glaring now at his sheepish partner. The only trouble was that the effect was marred by the coughing fit that followed his words, so that everything else was forgotten until the fit passed, water was administered, and Blair finally got his breath back.

"OK, Chief, message received and understood," Jim murmured, his expression one of fondness and concern. "If you're feeling up to it, I'll call the doc and ask if we can leave now. And if he prescribes you some medication, which I'm pretty sure he will, we'll get it made up before we go. No argument!"

And Simon added his not inconsiderable power of persuasion to Jim's words as he frowned ferociously at his young consultant. "What he says, Sandburg, and I'll take you both back to the loft myself. And you WILL take your meds like your partner tells you!"

It was a shame that Blair was by now completely immune to the captain's best efforts at intimidation, but he also knew that it wasn't worth upsetting Jim by being too recalcitrant over the question of meds. Then again, Jim would expect *some* whingeing, so Blair had no intention of disappointing him. He'd take his amusement where he could get it.

Some time later, back at the loft:

Three weary men entered #307, all looking decidedly the worse for wear, especially Blair. As he shuffled slowly over to the sofa, Jim watched him with troubled eyes, exchanging a meaningful glance with Simon as the smaller man sank down into the cushions with a sigh of relief. He was obviously still exhausted, and lines of pain etched his face, although, Blair being Blair, he hadn't made any complaint.

"Hey, Chief, why don't you wrap yourself in this while I take your coat?" Jim suggested gently, holding up the thick, warm afghan he had pulled off the back of the sofa. Blair was still dressed in the scrubs, but before he left the hospital, Megan had arrived to drop off dry socks and sneakers and Blair's warm coat. Jim grinned to himself as he recalled how their Aussie friend had fussed and exclaimed over Blair for the short time she was able to visit, knowing that it would have annoyed the younger man, even though he was far too gentle and generous a soul to complain. After her exchange tour was up, Megan had applied for, and gained, her American citizenship, much to the delight of them both, but because she and Brian Rafe were now an item, as per PD policy she had transferred from Major Crimes to Homicide. It didn't mean that she ignored her best mate Sandy, though, or Jim and the others in the unit for that matter, and she was happy to swing by the loft to pick up the items of clothing as required.

Peeking up at Jim through half-open lids, Blair offered his partner a tired half-grin. "Thanks, man. Sounds like a plan," he murmured, moving stiffly to shrug off his coat so that Jim could take it from him. He sighed in pleasure as Jim wrapped the afghan around him, plainly about to drop off to sleep again as soon as possible.

However, he forced himself to stay awake for a while longer, wanting to thank Simon for the lift home, and to ask if Jim wanted him to help him check out the loft for himself, knowing that the Sentinel would want to scour his territory for any overlooked evidence.

He was beaten to it by Jim himself, who was already scenting the air like a bloodhound on the trail.

"It's OK, Chief," the bigger man murmured fondly, gently ruffling Blair's curls. "You can go to sleep again if you want. As long as you're here, I can do the sensory check with Simon. But seriously, I doubt I'll find anything helpful. There are several different personal scents here, for sure, but I suspect most will be from the CSU techs. Without scenting every individual who has been here officially, I can't isolate anything which might be from the perp or perps. And we already know that the techs only found two sets of prints, yours and mine.

"I'm going to look around anyhow, but don't get your hopes up," and he included both Blair and Simon in his rueful glance.

Some time later, a despondent Jim finally gave up, a grimace of disgust marring his handsome face as he addressed Simon tiredly. "It's no good, Simon. If there is anything here, I can't find it, and to be honest, my head's aching so much now that there's no point in me looking any further. All I can say is that I'm certain whoever got in here didn't touch or move anything other than Blair and me. There's no sign of anything out of place either up in my bedroom, or in Blair's, except what has been checked over by the CSU people while they dusted for prints. The rest of the loft is untouched as far as I can tell, so it's fairly obvious that their only intention was to grab us and go.

"And why they should want to do that is anyone's guess," and he frowned in consternation as he glanced over at his sleeping partner.

"Don't be so down on yourself, Jim," Simon replied, nothing but sympathy in his warm, dark eyes. "If there was anything to find, I'm sure you'd have managed it, so I agree. What we need to do now is figure out why someone would take you both only to release you immediately. It doesn't make sense - excuse the pun - unless it's just to prove a point. That you're both vulnerable, and they want to shake you up.

"But who would want to do that? Any thoughts about anyone in particular who might have it in for you both? If it's some bizarre form of practical joke, it sucks!"

"God knows, Simon! With all the weirdos and villains we've dealt with over the years, it could be anyone with an axe to grind. Guess I'll just have to be extra vigilant, huh? But I'll certainly be giving it some thought, and I'm sure Blair will once he's awake and aware again."

"Fair enough, Jim. So, in the meantime, take a couple of days off. You've got plenty of leave outstanding, so pamper your partner a bit, and get him back on his feet. I'll have H and Rafe keep checking on leads, and they can pull any files of anyone you can think of.

"And I'll make sure there's a unit watching the building too. It's a pity it doesn't have CCTV. You might mention it to the other residents; see if you all can't persuade the managers to install it. It's about time!"

And Jim couldn't help but offer his friend a tired grin. "Yeah, I know, Simon. And you're right. We should be pushing for it. Guess I always thought I didn't need it with my senses to rely on to keep us safe.

"But it seems I can't rely on them after all," he added morosely. "How many times has Blair been attacked here anyway? Lash was only the first of many."

"Now stop that, Jim! No need to cover old ground. Let's just get you two up and about again as soon as possible, OK? I need my best team back in action."

"Fair enough, boss. But keep me updated, OK?"

"Goes without saying, my friend. I'll leave you in peace now, and get back to the office. You never know, there might be something there to report," and Simon closed the door behind him, leaving two exhausted and troubled friends behind him.

That afternoon:

Jim slouched on the sofa, beer in one hand and the TV remote in the other as he idly surfed through the channels to find something vaguely interesting to watch. He was feeling decidedly antsy; impatient to be doing something to actively investigate their weird kidnapping, although he knew that he was actually doing the most important thing right now. Even without Simon making it an order, he felt duty-bound to stay in the loft and keep watch over his ailing Guide, but the inactivity didn't sit well with a man of action such as he. After all, it wasn't as if he felt any the worse for wear now the drugs had left his system, not having been left in a similarly exposed location as had Blair. All he had really needed was a hot shower and an hour or two of real sleep, and he was good to go.

But the fact remained that Blair wasn't doing so well, and there was no way Jim would neglect the younger man's welfare. Even if his strong affection for his partner wasn't involved, his sense of duty wouldn't allow it, so he sighed in fond resignation and took another swig from his beer. He finally found a replay of a recent Jags game that he and Blair had missed through being on a stakeout, so he watched the on-screen action for a while with mild interest, even though his senses were still attuned to the younger man in the small bedroom under the stairs.

Although Blair had managed an hour's sleep on the sofa that morning, eventually he had roused enough to take himself to the bathroom for a shower and change of clothes. Dressed in his favourite warm sweats, he had managed to eat one of the sandwiches Jim had prepared for lunch, and taken his meds with a tall glass of milk, although not without a snort of disdain and the expected grimace of distaste. Uncharacteristically cynical, he had remarked dryly that he was glad that it wasn't pizza for lunch, adding that he might well give them up permanently from now on. And seeing as it had been a Golden-laced pizza which had drugged Blair on that last occasion, Jim couldn't find it in him to disagree. However, much to Blair's disgust, he found himself dozing off again even as he sat at the table, so Jim had encouraged him to go to bed for a while longer. He would have liked to argue the point, hating to be treated like a child or being any sort of burden to the older man even after all their years together, but in truth he really did still feel pretty groggy. And unfortunately he knew that Jim had been quite correct about the impending chest infection. Already his lungs felt congested, and he was a little short of breath, so he knew he'd have to finish his course of antibiotics whether he liked it or not. Jim didn't need him to be incapacitated any longer than he could help, so it was up to him to be sensible and do as his Sentinel bid. On this occasion, at least.

With the game nearly over, Jim checked his watch to see if it was time for Blair's next dose of medicine. He had heard and remarked the slight increase in the congestion affecting his Guide's lungs as indicated by more audible wheezing, and was pretty sure the younger man's temperature was up a little also. However, although he was naturally concerned, it was no worse yet than many previous incipient infections, and he knew that as long as they were careful, it would probably be nipped in the bud before anything dire could come of it. A weak chest was an unfortunate fact of life for Blair now, thanks to the damage done in the fountain, but it was something they had both learned to live with.

With the game now over, the Jags having won by the skin of their teeth, Jim switched off the TV and got to his feet, intending to go and check on his partner before getting the appropriate dose of medication ready. However, he was suddenly alerted to footsteps approaching the door, so he switched his full sensory attention onto the unknown and unexpected visitor. He knew that Simon was probably still in his office at the PD, having called in only an hour ago to tell Jim that there was nothing new to report so far, and that he would be going home soon himself in order to catch up on some much-needed sleep. If he had sent any of his team to check up on the loft or its occupants for any reason, he would certainly have told Jim so.

Frowning in irritation, his suspicions going into overdrive, Jim moved quickly and stealthily to the door, picking up his service pistol from where he had left it within easy reach on the side table. He peered through the spyhole just as the visitor knocked politely on the door, looking for all the world as if there was nothing amiss. To sentinel inspection, the young man was of average height, with dark, curly hair and brown eyes. He appeared to be relaxed, his pleasant, even-featured face wearing a slight smile as he waited for a response to his request for

entry. And more to the point, he was dressed in the casual but recognisable uniform of a CSU tech, an official-looking brown manila folder clutched under his arm.

Although still wary, Jim decided that the young man didn't appear to be a threat, and could possibly have some information to impart, so he unlocked the door, still leaving the chain on as he growled ungraciously, "Yes? What do you want?"

Rather than back down, the young man's smile grew as he replied, all wide-eyed innocence. "Detective Ellison? Sorry to bother you, sir, but I'm from the CSU. I have some results you might want to see regarding the drug tests on you and Dr Sandburg? I can show you my ID if you want?"

Still suspicious, Jim nodded cautiously, a vague instinct telling him that something wasn't quite right. But he released the chain anyway, certain that he could use his sidearm to good effect if necessary.

And in retrospect he would recall that suspicion, berating himself in undeserved self-disgust, because when the young man reached carefully into his inside jacket pocket to supposedly retrieve his ID, what came out instead was a small aerosol spray. One which was immediately discharged into the Sentinel's face, causing him to howl in pain and fury even as he fell to the floor, clutching at his head as indescribable agony overwhelmed his wide-open senses.

And then to pass out, dead to the world as the knockout gas worked almost instantaneously, leaving him out cold

Checking swiftly to left and right, the young man, his expression now cold and angry, stepped over the threshold, and pulled the door to behind him. Ignoring the downed detective, he marched purposefully over to the small room under the stairs where he was certain his prey was ensconced.

His plan was working perfectly thus far, and soon he would have time to gloat. Time to savour some revenge for the potential loss of the father he had barely gotten to know, thanks to the interfering input of Dr Blair Sandburg.

Earlier that afternoon:

The new, temporary tenant of #205, 852 Prospect regarded himself critically in the fly-blown mirror of the ancient bathroom cabinet. The face reflected back at him wasn't exactly clear, but he didn't intend to be in residence long enough to justify cleaning it. Or any other part of the neglected apartment for that matter. It had served its purpose, and he didn't even resent the prospect of losing his deposit as he was leaving today, and wouldn't be coming back.

Danny Lewinsky eyed the logo on his dark jacket. It denoted him as a member of the Cascade PD CSU's technical team; which was nothing but the truth. Certainly he hadn't been with the unit long. He was the most recent recruit, having started working with them a mere four months ago. But during that time, so very much had changed. Had changed him so fundamentally that he no longer recognised the person he had thought he was. He sneered nastily at his reflection as he allowed himself to recall the momentous revelations that had dictated his actions up until this point, knowing that this was the only way forward now. The only way to show the world what had been done to him and his family. And he already knew who was going to pay.

Born and raised in Tacoma, Danny had always believed that his single mom had been tragically widowed before his birth, retaining her maiden name and raising her child alone as best she could. They had had a good relationship, and truthfully he couldn't say he had suffered too much for not having a dad as his mom was nothing but supportive and nurturing, thrilled when he had done well enough at school and college to land himself a job as a forensic technician in Cascade. He recalled his pride when he had announced his success, which was reflected in his mom's expression and actions as she had hugged him fiercely, and told him she loved him so much.

And then, purely by chance, a secret was revealed which meant that he would never love her or trust her again. Ever. Because she had denied him his father for all this time, allowing him to believe the man was dead.

When Danny arrived in Cascade, there was already a high profile, on-going investigation by Central PD's Major Crimes Unit into a series of grisly murders involving rent boys and young gay men. Because of the likelihood that it was the work of a serial killer, the FBI had wanted to get involved, but had retained the services of Major Crimes' own profiler and consultant, Dr Blair Sandburg. It was through the painstaking investigation by MCU detectives led by Detective Jim Ellison, and the profiling expertise of Sandburg that had eventually pointed the finger of suspicion at Albert Masterson, a well-respected and successful local businessman. A businessman who apparently had been leading a very dark double life. Naturally, the man had denied all knowledge of the crimes, and had retained a high-priced lawyer to defend him, but forensic evidence had come to light that would finally secure his conviction.

It just so happened that part of the forensic process had involved testing for Masterson's DNA on items found with at least two of the victims' bodies, and Danny had been given the task of isolating the alleged perp's DNA. As part of the process, he had automatically taken and recorded a sample of his own DNA, just in case there was any suggestion of unintentional contamination of the samples by laboratory staff, and he had been shocked at the resulting comparison. He knew that he hadn't contaminated the evidence, and re-ran the comparison and the test several times to make sure, but the similarity of the two samples was too close for him to ignore. This man must be related to him in some way, and he knew he wouldn't rest until he had checked out Masterson's background for himself.

He had thrown himself into researching as much information as was possible from what was available in the public domain, but decided that the only way to know for certain if there was any blood relationship or familial connection between them was to meet the man face to face. Masterson was naturally under surveillance pending his likely arrest, but Danny still managed to arrange a clandestine meeting in the neutral territory of a popular but discreet nightclub, and what he had learned there had changed him forever.

Although naturally wary and suspicious of his guest's motives, Masterson had gradually accepted Danny's faltering explanation as to why he had engineered the meeting, and the pair had talked late into the night. By the time Danny had been forced to take his leave, he was convinced that he had found his long-lost father, and equally convinced that there was no way the man could be guilty. As far as he was concerned, they had bonded as father and son, and he would do everything in his power to ensure Albert's continuing freedom.

However, despite Danny's best intentions, Masterson had finally been arrested after all, and now it was up to his son to make the world sit up and take notice that he wasn't about to let an innocent man remain in custody as long as he had breath in his body. His father deserved no less of him. And despite the scientific training which should have convinced him otherwise, he was in complete denial that there was any real material evidence to counter that self-induced fantasy.

So, here he was, about to carry out the second and most important part of his plan. The first part had gone remarkably well, and he was justifiably pleased with himself, but now the dress rehearsal was over, and the real play was about to begin.

Checking his reflection one more time, he patted his pockets, making sure that he had everything he needed. This time he wouldn't need the help of the paid thugs he had hired before, because if all went to plan, Sandburg would be leaving on his own two feet, and Ellison wouldn't be a problem. And neither would the two uniforms in the unit outside once he had finished with them.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded decisively at his reflection and turned to go, knowing he wouldn't be coming back under any circumstances. And although he had worn latex gloves at all times, he didn't really care if they found traces of his DNA here after all. Because once he had secured his father's release, his job would be done, for better or for worse. Nothing else mattered.

Back in the loft:

As he approached the French door behind which he hoped that his prey was still sleeping unawares, Danny absently pocketed Ellison's handgun which he had automatically picked up in passing. It would do as a good

backup although he preferred his own 9mm Sig Sauer, which was presently clutched purposefully in his right hand. He had no intention of using the aerosol spray on Sandburg, as he wanted to keep the man conscious and mobile, but the gun in his hand, plus the threat of death or injury to the fallen detective should ensure Sandburg's cooperation. Cautiously opening the door, he was relieved to see that Sandburg was indeed still dead to the world, blankets pulled up to his chin as he snored softly, a sound which was accompanied by a soft but definite wheeze if Danny had cared enough to take note of it. But that was the last thing on his mind at the time as he grabbed the blankets in his free hand, yanking them off the bed before seizing the slumbering man by a handful of sweatshirt and shaking him roughly.

Blinking groggily, Blair croaked out, "Wha'? Wassup? Jim...?" only to stare in speechless shock at the barrel of a gun held mere inches from his face.

Without giving his confused victim time to gather his thoughts, Danny pulled him to his feet; the threat of the gun pressed against Sandburg's forehead enough to convince his unsteady limbs to cooperate.

"You're coming with me, Sandburg," Danny hissed. "And not one word. Not one attempt to escape or I'll finish off your lover for good."

"N...not my lover; my partner and roommate," Blair muttered nervously, even though he knew it was probably irrelevant. He simply hoped that this angry young man would be less willing to hurt Jim if he believed that he and Sandburg weren't actually together in that way.

"Whatever!" was the indifferent response. "Just grab some shoes and we'll be on our way. I have plans for you, *Doctor!*" and Blair couldn't quite suppress the shudder that ran through him at the pure menace in his captor's tone.

Pushing his feet roughly into the sneakers he had left beside the bed, Blair made no attempt to resist when the man grasped his arm in an iron grip and shoved him out of the French door. His attention was immediately diverted to the sprawled figure of his best friend lying just inside the loft's doorway.

"What have you done? Have you killed him?" he cried out in distress, his own danger forgotten in the face of his fear that Jim was already dead.

He was given another rough shake for his temerity, the barrel of the handgun now pressed painfully into the small of his back as Danny snarled, "Not yet, *Doctor*, but I can soon remedy that if you don't come quietly. So what's it to be?"

And what else could Blair do but cooperate? He had to trust that Jim was indeed only temporarily out of action, and in the meantime he had to concentrate on keeping himself alive so that Jim could rescue him. Because he had to believe that that was the only possible outcome of this bizarre situation. The Sentinel would come for his Guide. Anything else was unthinkable.

Cowed into reluctant submission more by the threat to his helpless partner than by the physical fear of the pistol barrel pressing painfully into his lower back, Blair would never afterwards recall exactly what passed as they left the building. If they met anyone on the way, he didn't remember it, but assumed that he must have acted sufficiently normally to satisfy his captor. The only time he consciously attempted to check on his surroundings was when he automatically looked over towards the unit that was supposed to be watching the building. Only to recoil in horror at the sight of the two uniformed officers slumped awkwardly in their seats.

With a cruel chuckle, his captor growled in his ear, "'S'OK, *Doctor*. They will wake up, just as your friend will – as long as you continue to cooperate, that is! So get your act together, and walk over to that car over there," – this said as he indicated a nondescript sedan parked a few dozen yards down the street.

"Just you climb in the driver's seat, and don't try to escape or even think about warning anyone. We're going on a short road trip, and I'm really looking forward to seeing how you're going to enjoy our luxury accommodations!"

Blair did as he was told, and soon they were on their way, driving towards what Blair was convinced was intended to be his final destination.

Part 2: And Down the Rabbit Hole:

Meanwhile, back at the loft:

Consciousness returned slowly for Jim, his senses difficult to bring back under control for far too long as he struggled instinctively with the dials while barely aware of what he was doing, or why he was in such dire straits. However, as memory tardily caught up with him, he growled in helpless fury as he forced himself unsteadily to his feet. *Blair! Where was Blair?* He had to know – to make sure – even though his barely cooperating senses were telling him that the beloved heartbeat was missing from the loft. Virtually staggering to the open French door, a single glance confirmed his dreadful fear. Blair was gone, and in the hands of someone - or 'someones' – unknown. Again.

Shit! This can't be happening! Not again, he muttered to himself, his distress exacerbated by both fury and frustration. He slammed his clenched fist into the door jamb, the pain of it forcing him to collect himself and focus on what needed to be done. He needed backup, and he needed it now.

He moved quickly over to the cordless phone, noting as he went that unsurprisingly his service pistol was missing. Whoever had taken Blair had obviously helped himself to it, but at least it didn't actually leave Jim unarmed. He had far more than just his backup .38 revolver at his disposal, all stashed in a secret lock box even Blair didn't know about despite their years together, and if he had to put the contents of that box to good use to get his Guide back, he would without a second thought.

Hitting speed dial, he was greatly relieved when Simon answered at the second ring, as Jim had feared that his captain may well have already gone home for the sleep he had said he needed.

"Jim? What is it? You just caught me on the way out, man. There's nothing new to report, so I'm going home for a few. I'll let you know if something turns up." His gruff and impatient tone made it quite clear that he wasn't best pleased to be delayed, but that soon changed when Jim began to speak.

"Simon, Blair's gone! Someone claiming to be a CSU tech came to the loft and sprayed me with some sort of knockout gas. And when I came round, Blair was gone! I thought there was supposed to be a unit outside! How could this have happened?"

"Whoa, Jim! Just hold on, man. Blair's gone, you say? I don't understand. There *is* a unit on Prospect, so how could they not have seen anything? Look, I'll call Dispatch now and get them to check the situation, OK? And then I'm coming over. Don't go anywhere until I get there, understood?"

"Understood, Captain, but I'm going to check the unit myself. And if those uniforms have fallen down on the job, they won't know what's hit them!" and Jim broke the connection before Simon could respond.

As Simon began to pull together the personnel he needed to deal with the new situation at the loft, Jim took his backup .38 and raced down to the street intending to see what the hell was going on with the cops in the unit. But when he got there, he could tell immediately that although both men were just about conscious now, they were anything but fully aware yet, the puzzlement in their eyes and expressions evidence of their lingering confusion.

Hammering on the driver's side window, Jim waded straight in when it was wound down to reveal the younger cop's angry and frightened face.

"What happened? Who got to you? Tell me! Because whoever it was has taken Dr Sandburg. He's gone!"

Blinking rapidly, the cop – Officer John Merrow – shook his head slightly as if to try and clear it. "I...I don't know, Detective Ellison," he stammered plaintively. "I mean, I can't remember..." and he tailed off, an anxious frown creasing his brow.

However, his partner, Sergeant Stanier – a fifteen year veteran – was much more lucid; his anger and self-disgust plain to see.

“Shit, Detective, I’m sorry! I remember now, and I can’t apologise enough. It was one of the CSU techs. I think his name’s Lewinsky. He came up to the car and said he wanted permission to take something up to your apartment. I’ve seen him before, so I knew he was genuine, you know? But when John here wound down the window to check on whatever it was he was carrying, he sprayed us both with something. And that is all I remember, Detective. He must have opened the door as soon as we were out cold and wound the window back up. And our sidearms are gone as well as the ignition keys. He must have taken them too.”

Although Jim was angry enough to set the muscles in his clenched jaw jumping in stress, he knew that there was little point in berating the cops any further. Stanier at least was embarrassed enough already by what he plainly considered to be a monumental error on his part, so Jim concentrated instead on seeing if he could detect anything helpful in the immediate vicinity other than the lingering scent of his partner. A scent tainted by hurt and fear, and which stabbed at Jim’s conscience even though common sense told him that he was no more to blame than these two cops.

Just then, Simon’s sedan pulled up outside 852, and the big man climbed out to hurry over to Jim’s side, his own fatigue pushed aside for the present.

“You OK, Jim? And you two?” he added, glancing into the unit to check on the occupants’ condition.

“I’ve got the forensics team coming over again, Jim, and we’ll get a door-to-door search going on both in the building and out here. But meanwhile, I want you to come back inside with me. See if we can come up with some clues.”

Jim knew exactly what his boss was getting at, and he was pretty sure the listening cops realised it also. He needed to use his senses as best he could even without his Guide’s backup, in order to rescue said Guide as soon as possible.

Somewhere in Cascade National Forest:

The elderly sedan carrying Blair and Danny Lewinsky jounced uncomfortably along a rutted dirt track leading deep into the Cascade forest. Gritting his teeth against his natural desire to babble nervously, Blair concentrated instead on keeping the car on the road, having learned already that his captor didn’t want to hear anything he had to say yet. Oh sure, he’d tried it almost as soon as they’d set out, as he had frequently managed to talk his way out of trouble in the past, but all it had earned him this time was a sharp jab in the ribs from Danny’s handgun, and a snarled command to shut the fuck up if he didn’t want Lewinsky to shoot the nearest innocent passer-by in retaliation. Not that Blair had known his captor’s name then, although he believed he’d seen the young man before at a crime scene, so it would appear that the uniform was genuine. But what the hell a crime scene tech would want with him, he had no idea, and just hoped that he would live long enough to find out.

Finally he rolled to a halt in front of a rustic cabin, which although apparently in reasonably good order, was little more than a smallish hunting lodge closely surrounded by tall trees and uncultivated undergrowth. Opening his door, Danny grabbed Blair’s sleeve in his left hand and yanked him over the centre console to exit from the passenger side so that there was no chance that his prisoner could break away and run for cover. He kept the gun pressed into the small of Blair’s back as he forced the slightly shorter man to approach the cabin door, gripping his captive’s collar with his free hand as they mounted the steps up to the small stoop. Once there, he released his grip and fished around in his pocket to retrieve a set of keys which he thrust into Blair’s hand, telling him to open the door and enter.

Blair had no option but to obey, and soon found himself standing in a sparsely furnished interior comprised of one large room divided into the different living areas required for basic, temporary accommodation. One corner served as a kitchenette/diner with the bare minimum of fixtures and fittings, while the opposite corner served as sleeping quarters, with a heavy, metal bedframe covered by a rough mattress and no other bedding aside from an old blanket folded at the foot of the bed. A couple of well-worn overstuffed chairs stood near to the central pot-bellied stove, and an empty gun rack plus few storage chests lined the walls. The two windows were single glazed and protected by heavy wooden shutters so that the interior was very dimly lit, and Blair blinked

rapidly as his eyes struggled to get accustomed to the semi-darkness that surrounded him as the door was pulled closed and locked behind them. The air inside the hut smelled musty and a pervasive chill soon made itself felt as Blair shivered suddenly, his sweats little protection against the dampness that spoke of a long period of non-occupation.

His rapid inspection was disrupted by a shove between the shoulder blades as Danny pushed him towards the bed. "Strip, now, and sit on the bed," came the sharp command, and Blair couldn't help but remonstrate despite the threat from the gun.



"Oh, man, come on! It's freezing in here! Look, I'll do what you want, OK? But let me keep my clothes, man. Please?"

He was answered in no uncertain terms as Danny sneered nastily, shaking his head as he growled, "You're joking, right? I *want* you to suffer after what you did. I *want* you to feel the cold and know that it's your own fault. I won't tell you again. Do it, or I'll use the spray on you and strip you myself. Either way, it's up to you."

And there wasn't really anything else Blair could do but comply, so he kicked off his sneakers and slowly peeled off his sweats and underwear, his naked skin quickly rippling with goose-flesh as the cold hit him unmercifully. Shivering, he sat on the damp mattress and looked up at his captor, trying hard not to look as pathetic as he felt. His reward was to have a pair of handcuffs thrown at him as Danny snarled, "Move up the bed and cuff yourself to the rails, now, and no funny business."

Again, Blair did as he was bid, and once he was secured to the iron bedstead, Danny finally put down the gun, a grin of malicious satisfaction twisting what should have been a pleasant and even-featured face.

"Finally, I have you where I want you. In a while, we're going to have a long talk, and I'll tell you what I expect from you. And maybe – just maybe – if you satisfy me, you might get to use the blanket. But not yet. Now, I'm going to get in a few supplies, and do a couple of chores, so you sit there and think on what I said. There's no escape, so you might as well resign yourself to doing as I say. You never know. You might still get to survive this if you cooperate well enough, and I get the results I want," and with a derisive laugh he turned away and went out to the car, leaving a chilled and anxious captive staring after him.

Oh, man, this is too much! Blair thought, hugging himself in an attempt to conserve a little body heat. *Just how many times do I have to get to freeze my ass off? And this mattress is damp too. Cold and wet was ever my world, and nothing's changed.*

And what the hell is this all about anyway? I don't know this guy, and I certainly have no idea what he wants with me. I'll just have to do my best to pump him for information. But then again, I've a feeling he's not going to be closed-mouthed anyway. He's enjoying this whole scene way too much!

But goddess, I hope Jim's OK and that he gets here soon. I really don't feel too well. This last thought was accompanied by a sudden, wracking cough that seemed to rattle his very bones. *Yep, all the signs of a proper chest infection starting up, and no antibiotics in sight. Oh, joy.*

After a few minutes, his captor returned, now wearing a thick, padded coat and carrying a duffel and a rolled-up sleeping bag. It was obvious to Blair that the guy didn't intend to suffer from the cold himself, and judging by the quality of the coat and sleeping bag, it was very likely that he wouldn't be indulging in lighting the stove either. And if it was this cold now in the early evening, how bad was it going to get during the night? It might be Spring, according to the calendar, but here in Washington State, the winter was often loath to let go so easily.

While Blair watched in silence, Danny made another couple of trips out to the car, returning with a box of foodstuffs and a few extras, such as a small camping stove and two battery-powered lamps. He unpacked the box of food and the other supplies, finally brewing a cup of tea for himself on the camp stove. Making a big show of sipping and thoroughly enjoying the fragrant brew while his shivering captive looked on, he pulled one of the armchairs closer to the bed and contemplated Blair for long minutes, obviously trying to intimidate Sandburg as much as possible before enlightening him as to why he was here. Taking a last sip, he put the empty mug aside and leaned forward, staring relentlessly into Blair's wide-eyed gaze.

"Let me introduce myself, Dr Sandburg. My name is Danny Lewinsky, and I'm going to tell you a story."

Some while later, Danny sat back, his tale told and now awaiting Blair's reaction. And for Sandburg's sake, it had better be satisfactory, or the other man was going to suffer.

As for Blair, he hardly knew where to begin. The explanation was so far removed from anything he had expected he was momentarily at a loss as how to answer without angering the misguided and delusional young man further, but he had to know. He had to understand what was behind Lewinsky's crazy plan, and why he could even think that it could work.

"Oh, man! Look, I get that you think Masterson is your father, OK? I mean, you are a qualified forensic technician after all, so I don't think you're misreading the DNA results. But why do you think he would have abandoned your mother before you were born? Have you asked her why? Because *she* may have left *him*. She may have had good reason to, if he was violent towards her and she was frightened for her unborn child.

"Look, I know you think he's an OK guy. Hell, I know how he comes across, man. I was with Detective Ellison when he was interviewed. He's smooth, urbane, and a successful businessman; and I know that his golfing buddies and business acquaintances think he's a stand-up guy. But I'm sorry, man, he's a classic example of a split personality. His alter ego is truly wicked, Danny. You must have seen the reports of what he did to his victims. The torture and mutilation was extreme, and indicative of an angry man in denial of his own latent homosexuality. When I prepared my unsub profile for the FBI and Major Crimes before his arrest on the evidence from the crime scenes and the autopsies, I was amazed to find how closely it actually fitted him once we'd got him. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't change that fact. And I wasn't alone in my opinion. The profiler from the FBI had come to similar conclusions independently.

"I'm sorry, man, truly. I know that's not what you want to hear, but it is what it is. But if you let me go, I'll speak up for you, Danny. I'll help you, man. Explain why you did this."

He should have known that his words were the last thing Danny wanted to hear, and barely had time to curl up and try to cover himself before the infuriated young man was on him, pummeling him with fists and open-handed slaps as he yelled in rage.

"You lie! It's not true! You lied about a good man, and you'll pay! You'll *all* pay! Your precious detective too! You'll see. You'll see!"

Eventually running out of steam, Danny desisted and sat back, panting in exertion as he glared at the battered figure on the bed. Sandburg was covered in reddening marks the shape of fists and handprints, some already bruising, while blood oozed from the torn skin of his wrist beneath the cuff where he had struggled in vain to escape from the beating. When Danny leaned over to grasp his captive's hair in order to look into Sandburg's eyes, he was shocked by the pain reflected back at him, despite the look of stubborn determination in the set jaw.

"Why did you make me do that?" he cried out in frustrated fury. "That was your fault, lying like that. Do you want me to hurt you? Huh? Do you *want* to die?"

And Blair answered him the only way he could, his voice raspy and breath wheezing in his increasingly congested chest, each inhalation made even more painful now with the damage to his bruised ribs.

"No man, I don't want to die. But there's nothing I can do. I can't stop you doing whatever you want with me."

"But there is! There *is!*" Danny replied, pleading now as he willed Sandburg to capitulate, the fanatical glint in his eyes truly frightening to witness.

"Albert was arraigned this morning, and he was refused bail. But I tell you, he didn't do those things you said he did. He shouldn't be locked up pending trial. You could help him! If you change your profile – tell them you were wrong – they'll think again. They'll see that he's innocent! And I'll have the chance to get to know my Dad after all these years!"

And all Blair could do was wordlessly shake his head, closing his eyes as he braced himself for the punishment he knew would follow.

Part 3: The Light at the end of the Tunnel:

The loft, 24 hours after the kidnapping:

Jim paced up and down, too wired to sit still as he waited for something – anything – to break the dreadful monotony of the last few hours. As yet there had been no demand, for ransom or otherwise, from Blair's kidnapper, although considerable progress had been made as to identifying the suspect. However, the reason behind his actions remained a mystery thus far, although hopefully there would be more information soon once the other officers investigating the case checked in.

From his seat on the sofa, a tired and dishevelled Simon looked on, a worried frown furrowing his brow as he watched his friend pacing restlessly, but he refrained from commenting, as he knew it would do no good. He just prayed that Joel, H and Rafe would have something concrete to report when they arrived in the next hour or so.

Trying to keep his mind alert, he cast his mind back to that initial phone call from Jim a mere 24 hours previously, informing him that his young consultant had been taken again, and once again he began to piece together everything he, Jim and his team had done since then to try and locate the missing man. The more time that passed without contact from the kidnapper increased everyone's anxiety levels, and Simon dreaded the possibility that he might have overlooked something that could have speeded up the investigation.

As soon as he had set things in motion from his office, he had hurried over to the loft, guessing that Jim would need his presence if he were to maintain some sort of hold on his temper and sanity, and also if he wanted to use his senses to search for additional clues. Simon knew very well that as a Guide he was a poor substitute for Sandburg, but at least he knew what to expect, and by now could recognise the signs that indicated that the Sentinel was about to zone and could do something about it. He also felt his responsibility deeply towards both Ellison and Sandburg, not just because they were an important part of his unit, but also because he was genuinely fond of them both, and considered them to be two of his best friends.

And not only that, but because Daryl thought so highly of his friend Blair, it was incumbent on Simon to do everything he could to secure the young Guide's safe release. His son would expect no less of him.

Consequently, he had made the loft his temporary HQ, from which he was able both to monitor Jim and direct his operation. And catch a catnap or two on Jim's sofa when he was able, because he hadn't slept in his own bed since his men had both disappeared for the first time more than 48 hours ago now, and the exhaustion weighed heavily on him.

On his arrival at Prospect, while awaiting the forensics team and the other officers he had pulled in for the door-to-door search, he had accompanied Jim around the immediate vicinity of 852, doing his best to ground Jim while the Sentinel used his sense of smell to literally test the air. By now Simon – and the watching cops from the surveillance unit – knew better than to scoff when Jim had claimed to be able to scent his Guide, and reveal that his younger partner was distressed and in pain. But it was even more astounding when, after a few minutes, Jim calmly stated that he had isolated the scent of the man who had taken his partner, as he recognised it from one of those he had catalogued as pervading the loft after the first kidnapping. And that was only too probable if the suspect was indeed Danny Lewinsky as Sergeant Stanier believed, since the tech would have been there in his official capacity.

The revelations had continued when Jim tracked down the cops' missing firearms and ignition keys to a dumpster in the alley running alongside his building.

Although there was little extra for the forensics team to collect at the loft this time around, the door-to-door search soon bore fruit when the officers, including H and Rafe, started showing hastily copied pictures of Lewinsky to the other residents, after a call to his Lieutenant confirmed that the tech hadn't shown up for work the previous morning, and wasn't answering either his phone at home or his cell phone.

After a relatively short time, Rafe had turned up trumps when he knocked on the door of #207, the apartment directly beneath Jim's loft. The elderly, garrulous Mrs Cubbins was only too glad to help, as she was very fond of her neighbours upstairs, particularly 'that nice young Blair', who frequently ran errands for her and helped her carry her groceries up from the corner store. Horrified to learn of his disappearance, she had eagerly scanned the grainy picture she was shown, and recognised the face immediately.

"Oh yes, I know him. Well, not really *know* him because we've never really met. See, he just moved in to old Mr Gentry's apartment down the hall. Mr Gentry's not well, you see, and has gone into a care home, so his daughter's leasing out the place to short-term tenants to help pay the bills. And that young man moved in only a couple of days ago." However, her friendly and open expression had then become somewhat perplexed as she had added thoughtfully, "Come to think of it, he was with Blair when I saw him last. And it was odd, you know? Because although that other young man glared at me as if I'd done something to offend him when I called out a greeting, Blair didn't seem to hear me at all. Just stared ahead, looking all distracted.

"Oh my!" she had gasped then. "Was that when he was taken? Oh dear, and I had no idea! I should have realised that something was amiss!" and she almost burst into tears of mortification, until Rafe managed to calm her down and comfort her with reassuring words.

Things had moved quickly after that, with Simon applying for, and being granted a warrant to search the vacant apartment, and sure enough, there were ample signs of recent occupancy even if nothing had been touched or used other than the bathroom. There were no fingerprints to go from, but carelessly disposed of tissues quickly yielded traces of DNA which were matched to Lewinsky's sample as filed away on the personnel database. It was almost as if the man wasn't overly concerned about being identified once he had carried out his mission to seize Sandburg.

But as to the reason why he had done it; that was what Simon hoped to learn in the very near future.

His musing was interrupted by Jim, who moved quickly to open his door before his visitor had time to knock. But since that visitor was Joel, who was easily recognisable to Jim, and who was also well aware of his friend's habit of pre-empting audible demands for entry, no comment was necessary. Instead, Jim took Joel's arm politely but urgently, and led him over to where Simon was sitting, the anxiety and fearful anticipation on his handsome face painful to behold.

Turning to face his friend, his own expression one of deep concern and sympathy, Joel took a moment to take Jim's hand in both of his. "I'm so sorry, Jim. You know how much I love that boy, and I hate for this to happen to him again. But I truly believe we'll get him back, my friend. I have news which hopefully will help to explain the reason for this kidnapping. Let's sit down, and I'll begin."

Nodding in appreciation at his friend's comforting words, Jim indicated the love seat, while he sat beside Simon on the sofa.

"Thanks, Joel. I know you care for him too. So what can you tell us?"

"OK, well, here goes. And it's a strange tale, I can tell you that now," Joel began, gazing from one man to another, and assured of their rapt attention.

"When Lewinsky's supervisor was told of our suspicions, he looked into the man's most recent casework in case it turned up any leads or suggestions. I have to say he was very sceptical, and maintained that the young man has been no trouble at all ever since he started working for the CSU a few months back. His forensic expertise isn't in question, and his attitude towards his job and his colleagues is apparently very good.

"Anyhow, the last lab work he was involved in was the on-going Masterson case, amongst other things isolating the scumbag's DNA from various items of material evidence. And one of the first steps in the procedure is to record a sample of the tester's DNA also as a control in case there's any suggestion of contamination. I know you're aware of this, but I'm repeating it for a reason, so please bear with me," he added gently, acknowledging the growing impatience on Jim's face.

"Sorry, Joel," Jim murmured somewhat sheepishly. "Please go on."

Nodding understandingly, the older man continued. "Anyhow, apparently it occurred to the supervisor to check up on these last results, and it turns out that Lewinsky and Masterson are related in some way. There are just too many similarities between the DNA samples for it to be otherwise.

"Now, according to Lewinsky's file, he was brought up by his single mother, who was widowed before his birth. But all of a sudden he's presented with a possible father out of the blue, and that father has just been arrested as a serial killer. No wonder he's gone off the rails.

"But I still don't see why he would have taken Blair. What can he hope to gain?"

"Anyway, I asked H to see if he could contact the mother, who still lives in Tacoma, to see if he can get confirmation of any of this. He'll be here as soon as he has something to report. And all being well, Rafe should be here soon also with the results of the search on Lewinsky's official apartment. I think we can safely assume that the one in this building was rented for one purpose only. To be close to his intended victim."

Sitting back in his seat, he regarded his listeners carefully, hoping that between them they could come up with some answers.

Staring off into the middle distance, Jim's frown was thunderous as his mind worked overtime, as did the muscles jumping in his jaw. In his admittedly cynical view, only in Cascade could such a combination of coincidence and weirdness occur, and the only possible victim just had to be his innocent partner and Guide. Blair Sandburg, the perpetual fall guy and undeserving patsy. Jim simply couldn't believe that his young friend could possibly have done something so awful in a past life that his karma should be so bad. Rather, it seemed to him that Incacha had had the right of it when sharing some ancient wisdom with the newly-online Ellison all those years ago; and only now recalled. He had told Jim that the gods only placed such heavy burdens on those whose shoulders and spirits were strong enough to bear them. And seeing that he had seen fit to pass the Way of the Shaman onto Jim's young Guide while on his death-bed, who was Jim to gainsay his old mentor? Jim might well have serious issues when it came to the spiritual side of the sentinel phenomenon, but right now he needed every bit of hope – and help – that he could get.

But Joel's account made a sick sort of sense, even though there had to be more to it than first met the eye. And he was without the person who was best qualified to answer that riddle, his beloved Guide. The Guide to whom he had constantly failed to confess his love and attraction, and this time it just might be too late to remedy the situation.

He had to fight to control the moisture that threatened to spill from his suddenly teary eyes as he turned to face his friends and colleagues, his throat working as he almost growled, "Shit, Joel, Simon; why can't the kid get a break? How many times does he have to be threatened, beaten, shot and shot at before he gives up in disgust? He's done everything for me, stuck with me for seven years despite every rotten trick I've pulled on him. And he's still here. Still living under my roof and under my stairs like some sort of friendly household troll. And all he has to show for it is a consolation prize of a doctorate and his name on the lease, and that's only as a guarantee so that I can't throw him out again.

"But I tell you this. If I get him back again, there'll be no more 'obfuscation' on my part. No more denial. I'm going to tell him just how much I love and need him, and I don't mean just as a guide and brother. And if that upsets TPTB at the PD, too bad! I can't live without him, and I don't intend to!"

He glared defiantly at his friends, almost daring them to disagree, but was taken aback at their reactions, which nearly mirrored each other. Both men were grinning widely, nothing but acceptance and understanding in their eyes. But it was Joel who spoke first, and his words shocked Jim to the core.

"Well, it's about time, Jim! You do know that most of the department already think you two are a cute couple? Have thought so for years, but wondered why you didn't just come out and 'fess up. Then we all decided that it was better if we just kept quiet, since Blair wouldn't have been able to ride with you as an observer if he was your SO. But now he's a regular consultant, working with all departments, we thought you'd come out and say something at last. No wonder the poor kid's been looking bereft lately. He must be wondering exactly what he needs to do to spur you into action!"

Jaw dropping open, Jim gawped from one to the other, seeing the confirmation in Simon's beaming smile.

"Well, shit," he breathed eventually. "I didn't know! I mean, yes, in the early days I heard plenty of whispers, but I didn't repeat them to Blair because I thought he'd freak out. And he had such a rep as a skirt-chaser I didn't think I had a chance. So I put the thought aside, and just thought of him as a friend. One I treated so badly so many times," he added abashedly.

"But I guess that explains why he's still here, huh? Still hanging in despite my obstinacy.

"Gods, what did I ever do to deserve such devotion, huh? Tell me that!" and he looked away, shame and self-disgust colouring his chiselled features.

His attention was drawn back immediately as Simon responded, the grin now replaced by a reproachful scowl.

"Only you can answer that, my friend. But the fact remains that Blair is still here; still prepared to stand by you. And the only reason for that is because of his love for you. And I'm not talking about the brotherly sort either. Or as Guide to his Sentinel, however important that is to him. So stop with the self-flagellation and concentrate on getting your man back.

"And once he's back, you tell him exactly what he needs to hear, capice? And that's an order!"

And what else could Jim do but nod in capitulation. The time to ask for forgiveness and understanding would occur once Blair was safely back here under his roof and in his Sentinel's territory where he belonged.

However, Jim had little opportunity to ponder on these new and unsettling concepts, as his attention was diverted by the arrival of H, hot foot from his attempts at contacting Lewinsky's mother. As the normally ebullient young detective entered the loft, his expression uncharacteristically solemn, he slapped Jim's shoulder in sympathetic camaraderie. "Hey, Jim, come on, man. Lighten up, babe. We'll get him back, you'll see! Hairboy's a fighter, babe, and you know it. He won't give in."

And all Jim could do was offer a sad smile in appreciation of his colleague's optimism. "Yeah, I know, H. He's nothing if not resilient. So, what have you learned?"

And H told them.

"OK, so this is what I found out. I managed to track down Ms Rosetta Lewinsky at her home in Tacoma. She was just about to go out to work at a local realtor's, but she agreed to talk to me, especially when I mentioned the name of Masterson. The gist of her story is that yes, Masterson is her son's father, but she left him before the baby arrived. Apparently the two met while attending the same business college. She said Masterson was fun, clever and charming, and they spent a lot of time together. But it was only after they graduated that things got serious, and they married and moved in together. And that's when things changed. She said she discovered this whole other side to him, when he'd get moody and angry for no apparent reason. And jealous too. But she only got really afraid after he hit her during an argument, and she knew she had to leave. She didn't sound like the type of woman to put up with battered wife syndrome, know what I mean? So she said she packed up and left in secret without telling him where she was going or that she was pregnant. She told me there was no way she'd allow a crazy man like that anywhere near her child – her description, not mine. So anyway, she resumed her maiden name, and after the baby was born, she made a life for herself in Tacoma, staying as far under the radar as possible just in case Masterson should try and track her down.

"But as far as she knows, he never did. She heard that he'd settled in Cascade and built himself a nice little business empire, but it never occurred to her that he and Danny would ever have reason to meet up, or that they would ever discover their relationship.

"Anyhow, upshot is that she's really upset about Danny's finding out about his father this way, and she's scared of what he might do. I mean, she didn't actually come right out and say so, but I'm thinking that perhaps she's got concerns about her son's emotional state. Like how unpredictable are his reactions likely to be? Whatever, she's going to come to Cascade as soon as possible to see if she can perhaps make a public appeal to her son, and maybe help talk him out of whatever he's got going on if she can. If he decides to contact us anytime soon, that is.

"So that's it, the story so far. But it still doesn't help us locate Hairboy, does it?"

Grim-faced, Jim absorbed H's information for a moment before looking up to meet his colleagues' expectant gazes in turn.

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, I guess that answers one question as to Lewinsky's possible mental health. If his father's the sort of psycho Blair thinks he is, then it's not unreasonable to believe that the son could have inherited the same violent tendencies, even if they've been suppressed up until now. Like father, like son, huh?"

"But I hope I'm wrong. Otherwise Blair could be in for a world of hurt. Shit!" and he shook his head in angry frustration, his expression one of a man who wants to hit something or someone, and hit it hard.

Simon reached over to clasp Jim's forearm as he commanded his friend's attention. "Don't go buying trouble, Jim. Just because there's a blood relationship doesn't mean that the son's tainted in the same way. Anyhow, that psychology stuff is Blair's shtick, not ours, and he's far more qualified and capable of talking his kidnapper down than anyone else I know."

Jim stared at his boss and friend for a moment, and then nodded briskly. "You're right, Simon. If anyone can talk his way out of trouble, Blair can. But meanwhile I want to interview Masterson again. See what he knows, and if he can provide any clues as to where his boy's taken Blair. That OK with you?"

"You got it, Jim, but I'll come with you," Simon replied decisively. "Joel, see if you can dig up more detail about Masterson's early days here in Cascade, OK? Just in case we've missed some vital connection. And tell Rafe to check in with us at the PD as soon as he's done with the search of Lewinsky's apartment, OK? And H, you can help him go through anything he's turned up, and report back. Anything you can find that gives us an idea as to how close their relationship actually is.

“And we’ll go and see if we can rattle that murdering bastard Masterson’s cage,” he added in a ferocious growl, turning to face Jim, who was already reaching for his coat.

Shortly afterwards: Inside an interview room in the Major Crimes Unit:

Albert Masterson sat at the scratched table, looking relaxed and comfortable despite his prison jumpsuit and cuffed hands. He smiled serenely into the two-way mirror opposite him, obviously aware that he was being observed, and apparently unconcerned by it. To the average observer, his demeanour would undoubtedly seem more appropriate to an informal business meeting than a PD interview room, but appearances can be deceptive, especially to someone with sentinel sight and hearing.

On the other side of the glass, Jim stared fixedly at his target, noting in grim satisfaction the slightly elevated heartbeat and the first signs of sweat beading brow and upper lip on Masterson’s otherwise urbane features. The guy knew how to make a good impression, to be sure, but Jim was certain he could soon upset that practised composure. But it was yet to be seen as to whether his prodding and poking would yield anything useful.

Turning to face Simon (who was standing beside him, carefully observing both his detective and the prisoner) he fixed the bigger man with a steady gaze as he said, “I’m ready if you are, Simon. Let me get in there, OK? I need to get some answers.”

Simon returned his gaze for a long moment, his own eyes troubled. He hoped he wasn’t making a huge error of judgement in allowing Jim into the same room as the man whose son apparently held Sandburg prisoner, but no one was better qualified to ‘read’ Masterson than MCU’s resident organic lie-detector.

“OK, Jim. But no undue aggression, man. I have to trust that you’ll keep yourself under control or I’m pulling you out of there, whether you like it or not. When we get Blair back, he won’t want to be visiting you in jail for committing grievous bodily harm or worse, will he? And we both know how sharp Masterson’s lawyer is, so don’t give him any ammunition for filing a complaint against you. Because given the chance, he’d do it, and enjoy it too.

“And there he is, the slimy bastard,” he muttered, glowering as Albert’s high-priced defence attorney, Gerard DeLawrence - of DeLawrence, DeLawrence and Saunders - was shown into the room to take his seat next to his client. “You wouldn’t think such a smooth and sophisticated guy was such an amoral weasel under the skin would you? So go ahead, but watch yourself, Jim. And I’ll be watching from in here, OK?”

And with a quick nod of assent, Jim strode out of the observation area and let himself into the room next door, primed and determined to shake something useful loose if he possibly could.

“Ah, Detective Ellison,” DeLawrence drawled almost insolently as the big cop took a seat opposite the pair, his eyes cold and hard although his movements were deceptively relaxed and casual.

Barely nodding in the direction of the haughty-looking attorney, Jim fixed his piercing gaze on Masterson, prolonging the charged moment for several seconds longer than absolutely necessary in order to intimidate the man as much as possible from the outset.

“DeLawrence,” he finally acknowledged, although he kept his eyes on Masterson. “We have some questions for your client, and I strongly suggest you advise him to answer them. They pertain to another, separate charge which he might be able to assist us with. A kidnapping...” and he tilted his head towards Masterson in a tacit invitation to tell all.

Unfortunately for the Sentinel, even before either man could make any verbal response, his senses told him that Masterson clearly had no idea what he was referring to. Attorney and client exchanged perplexed glances, but it was DeLawrence who answered first.

“Detective Ellison, I have no idea what sort of stunt you’re trying to pull here, but my client is saying nothing. If you need to question him further about the alleged crimes with which he has already been charged, then we will consider it at another time. But this is an unconscionable imposition on a man already stressed enough.”

Jim wasn't ready to give up yet, however, and he directed his next comment at Masterson.

"That would be a pity, DeLawrence. Because it might be in his own interest, as it involves his long-lost son. You *do* have a son, don't you, Masterson? Would you like to know what young Danny's been up to?"

This time he knew he'd scored a palpable hit, as Masterson straightened up sharply in his seat, and stared back in narrow-eyed anger tempered by overt curiosity. But before he could speak, DeLawrence reached over and gripped his forearm, hissing, "Not a word, Albert! Don't let him goad you!"

But to no avail, as before their very eyes the suave businessman morphed into a vicious and aggressive predator, all the more frightening because the manic glint in his eyes was offset by indubitable intelligence.

Impatiently shaking off the restraining hand, Masterson leaned forward to snarl at Jim. "What do you know of my son, *Detective*? Tell me! If you've hurt him at all..." and the unvoiced threat of bloody revenge was easy to infer from his ugly tone.

OK, this is good, Jim thought. This is the persona Blair predicted even if none of us have ever witnessed it before. No one watching him now could deny that he truly is a deranged killer. But now to see if it helps me any as regards Blair's whereabouts.

"He's not hurt yet, to the best of my knowledge, Masterson, but he soon could be. We believe your son has kidnapped a police profiler from this department. Dr Blair Sandburg. Maybe he thinks it'll help you somehow, who knows? But if when we find him it turns out that he's hurt Dr Sandburg in any way – any way at all - I doubt you'll ever see him again," and the menace in his voice was equally unmistakable.

For a moment, Masterson was silent, but when he finally responded, it wasn't in any way Jim had expected or hoped for. Totally ignoring the irritated lawyer at his side, Masterson sat back in his seat, visibly relaxing even as his furious expression changed to one of entirely malicious satisfaction.

"Well, well, well!" he sneered. "The boy has balls after all! Wants to help his dear old Dad, does he? Well, good for him! Let's hope he teaches that little faggot profiler a lesson he'll never forget!"

It was as well for Masterson that Simon chose that moment to make his entrance, his instinct both as cop and friend to Ellison warning him that the Sentinel was about to erupt. Sure enough, even as he reached for Jim, barking out the order to 'STAND DOWN, DETECTIVE!', Jim leapt to his feet with a roar of primal rage as the evil man before him pushed his every last possessive and protective button. This *creature* and his thrice-damned spawn had threatened his Guide. Had *hurt* his Guide, and now they must pay!

Luckily for all concerned, Simon's next words had the desired effect on the furious man, otherwise Jim might well have been looking at imprisonment for aggravated assault at the very least.

"Jim. *JIM!* Calm down, man. Blair needs you free to search for him, not banged up in a holding cell!"

For a moment it was touch and go, and Simon wasn't sure he had reached his friend, but then with another growl, Jim relaxed his predatory stance and stepped back.

"OK. It's OK, Simon. I'm back. That scum's not worth it!" and he turned without another glance at the frightened pair cowering at the other side of the table, marching straight-backed out of the room to continue his search for the most important person in his life.

Meanwhile, back at the cabin:

It was a very troubled Danny Lewinsky who sat immobile; studying the unconscious figure huddled on the bed. This was nothing like he had planned or expected, and he was at a loss as to how he should proceed. His thoughts tumbled around in his brain, none of them supplying a truly satisfactory answer, and he was bitterly resentful as to how everything had gone wrong so quickly. But the simple fact was that he had failed to take his prisoner's physical fragility into consideration, and the resulting consequences had short-circuited both his intended plan of action and the very mind-set that he required to carry it out.

As he continued to watch Sandburg, he felt distinctly uncomfortable, ruefully admitting to himself that he was feeling an entirely unwanted upsurge of guilt and sympathy towards his victim. Sure, Sandburg was partly to blame for his present condition, but Danny knew that he was responsible for the most part. When Sandburg had stubbornly refused to fall in with Danny's demands, he had felt such a surge of rage that he had struck out at his helpless captive, backhanding the other man so hard across the face that his head had impacted with the metal bedhead, knocking him unconscious. And he had pretty much remained that way ever since, unless you counted a couple of times when he had roused just enough to cough as if his lungs wanted to burst from his chest. It had been a long, cold night, and whereas Danny had intended to let Sandburg suffer, he had found himself unable to stomach his own cruelty. Because not only was the bruised and unconscious man shivering continuously and ice-cold to the touch, but there was a distinct wheeze and rattle in his chest as his breathing grew ever more tortured and shallow, until Danny knew for sure that a severe infection, probably pneumonia, had taken hold.

And despite his anger, there was no way Danny wanted to be responsible for Sandburg dying from that unforeseen combination, especially before he had even had a chance to contact the PD with his demands. Even an aggravatingly intractable profiler could at least be used as a bargaining chip, but not if he didn't survive. A dead hostage wasn't going to get him or his father anywhere: that was for sure.

So he had ended up by dressing his captive once again in the discarded sweats and underwear, plus a pair of his own thick socks, and wrapped him in the sleeping bag. He had also propped him up as best he could in order to relieve the pressure a little on his struggling lungs, the cuffs now abandoned as unnecessary. Even so, he knew these actions were only of minimal help, and that Sandburg needed urgent medical treatment and undoubtedly recourse to some heavy-duty antibiotics. Which he had most likely already been prescribed and which remained uselessly back in Sandburg's apartment.

With a sigh of frustration, Danny finally came to a decision. Sandburg was going to die in his custody if he didn't act quickly, and that would never do. But if he called now, demanding his father's release in exchange for Sandburg, at least they might begin to take him seriously, and some sort of meaningful dialogue would ensue. Rising to his feet, he nodded decisively. He knew he would have to drive some little distance in order to get a signal for his cell phone, but Sandburg wasn't going anywhere. Just let him survive another day. Just one more day; that's all Danny asked.

Suddenly, the amplified bark of a bullhorn from outside the cabin made him nearly jump out of his skin in fright, and he gasped in horror as he registered the demand for his surrender. The next moment saw him scrambling for his gun before leaping onto the bed in order to haul Sandburg's unconscious body to him, his intention to use the other man as a living shield against the surrounding cops. His panicked mind grappled with the shock of his discovery, and disbelief too. How had they made the connection? He hadn't even told his father of his plans.

But all that was irrelevant now. All that mattered now was that they didn't gun him down out of hand, and to avoid that, he needed Sandburg.

Part 4: Not the way to Wonderland:

Seated in Simon's office while he awaited his boss's return from the interview room, Jim worked on maintaining the firm grip he had imposed on his emotions. The incandescent fury that had almost overtaken him when faced with Masterson's pure malice had hardened to an icy cold rage that settled over him like a cloak. The same sort of cold, calculated control that had seen him through so many successful covert ops missions in the past, and would see him through this latest, and most important trial. He would rescue Blair, or die trying. There was no other way.

In a small, primitive part of his mind he regretted the fact that Simon had gotten between him and his prey. He would have enjoyed tearing Masterson's head from his shoulders, and damn the consequences; to himself, at least. But Simon had had the right of it when he had reminded Jim of his real goal, which was to save his Guide, and for that, Jim was grateful.

Soon, he was able to track Simon's footsteps as he crossed the bullpen, and looked up to ascertain the big captain's mood from his expression as soon as the man entered the room. Closing the blinds for a modicum of privacy before he took his seat, Simon turned to face his subordinate, a frown of grim irritation tempered with deep fatigue and worry etching harsh lines in his dark skin.

"Well, that was fun – not!" he sighed, almost *sotto voce* before pointing an admonishing at his errant detective. "What were you thinking, man? Or were you thinking at all, just acting on some primal instinct? I warned you to keep hold of your temper, Jim, but it's as well I stayed near enough to haul your ass out of the fire – again! Luckily for you, DeLawrence's bluster that he wanted your badge was just that, as he knows for a fact that he'll get no cooperation from me or anyone else in the unit to back up any complaint he's tempted to make.

"But it was a close-run thing, man. Way too close, so I hope you've gotten yourself under control now."

And Jim had the grace to look suitably shame-faced as he replied, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good, Simon. And thanks. I mean that. I admit I was ready to tear that piece of shit limb from limb, and enjoy doing it. But what now, sir? It's been more than 24 hours since Blair was taken, and we still haven't heard anything. No demands, no nothing!" and he clamped his jaw shut, grinding his teeth in frustration as he regarded his friend and superior, his eyes mutely pleading for some sort of miracle.

Shaking his head tiredly, Simon was about to reply when Jim's head swung around to glare almost accusingly at the door. "H and Rafe are coming over," the Sentinel murmured. "Perhaps they've got something for us?" and he couldn't quite contain the hint of wistfulness in his voice as the two younger detectives knocked and entered, both grim-faced but looking excited also.

It was Rafe who started right in, somewhat out of character as he usually gave precedence to his more outgoing partner, and that in itself was indicative of his eagerness. "We've just come from Lewinsky's apartment, and I think we may have found something! See, he kept a journal, which I found in a box tucked under his bed. There're several volumes of it, and he wrote in detail about his finding out about Masterson, and goes on at length about his feelings, which will no doubt be of interest to a psychiatrist once we get him, but I guess we don't need to know that stuff yet?

"Anyhow, we checked through them together, and when H was going through the transcripts of Lewinsky's conversations with his Dad, he found a reference to a cabin Masterson owns somewhere in Cascade National Forest. Seems he sometimes goes hunting when he's not searching for murder victims!" and Rafe's handsome face twisted in disgust.

"So, what do you think? Could it be a lead?" H's impatient voice chimed in, as he looked from Simon to Jim and back, his face almost glowing in hopeful anticipation.

And Jim knew. He knew instinctively that this was it, and his growled response, plus the light of battle in his eyes convinced his listeners that he was correct.

"That's it! I can feel it! That's where he'll have taken Blair! Get me that address, and let's be on our way!"

And as his friends and colleagues exchanged fierce and determined grins as they sprang into action, Jim stared out of the window for a moment, looking out towards the far distant forest.

Hold on, babe. Just a while longer. I'm coming, Blair. I'm coming for you!

Things moved swiftly after that discovery, although it took longer than expected to obtain the location of the cabin, much to Jim's growing impatience. But finally Rafe's search turned up trumps, and the rescue mission was underway. Simon quickly pulled together a team, which included himself, H and Rafe as well as Jim, because Blair's friends wouldn't have it otherwise, and they were on their way.

Within a relatively short time they pulled up at the designated rendezvous point some little distance away from the cabin, and the personnel already present gathered around to confirm the plan of attack. There were a couple of State Troopers, several other heavily-armed uniforms and two FBI agents from the Cascade Field Office, as

well as the EMS team that Simon had thought to have on stand-by. Although not enamoured of working with the FBI, for once Jim accepted it with relative equanimity, especially as his nemesis, SAC Mulroney, had moved on to pastures new, much to virtually everyone in the PD's satisfaction. His replacement was far more cooperative and less arrogant and overbearing, so joint operations were no longer the universally unpopular and aggravating trials of the past.

Having said that, he and his colleagues were still chary about exposing his abilities to agencies outside of the PD, so he would be sticking by Simon and the other detectives as and when he needed to use his senses.

Soon it was time to move out, the officers spreading out to surround the cabin while keeping in contact via radio. When everyone was in position and had checked in accordingly, Jim nodded to Simon, who quickly gripped his shoulder, knowing that the Sentinel was about to go into action and would appreciate the grounding touch. As he, Rafe and H looked on, Jim tilted his head in a 'listening' pose, and sent out his hearing, desperate for the sound of his Guide's soothing heartbeats.

Sure enough, within seconds he located the beloved sound, only to discover that it was far from reassuring. Although he quickly ascertained that there was only one other person present, Blair's heart sounded laboured and irregular, and was accompanied by the harsh, wet sounds of seriously compromised breathing. As he had feared, the younger man had plainly succumbed to pneumonia after all, and Jim knew they had to get to him, and get him treated without delay.

Quickly relaying the information to Simon, he almost vibrated in place as he willed the older man to give the order to move in. Thankfully, the captain knew better than to question either Jim's instincts or his integrity by now, so after passing the word to his team, he lifted the bullhorn to his lips and demanded Lewinsky's surrender.

Unsurprisingly, there was no immediate response other than the sounds of sudden movement from within, so Jim and Simon approached stealthily using the cover of the thick undergrowth. Secure in the knowledge that the rest of their team were standing by, ready to back them up as necessary, they reached the stoop, still without any reaction other than the kidnapper's now galloping heart rate, which sounded loudly in Jim's ears. Moving quietly, they took up positions on either side of the door, guns raised and prepared for action as Jim nodded to Simon to indicate his readiness. On the count of three, Jim kicked in the door and went in low, as Simon went in high, and both reacted swiftly and instinctively to the tableau that met their eyes.

As Jim had confirmed before moving in, both of the cabin's occupants were huddled together on the bed in the corner, furthest away from both windows and door. And though not unexpected, the predictable impasse was no less unwelcome for all that. Gun pressed firmly against his unresponsive captive's temple, Danny Lewinsky crouched behind his living shield, his young face reflecting a myriad of emotions, including anger, frustration and bewilderment as he finally made his demands.

"Get back! Keep away from me or he gets it! I don't want to kill him, but I will if you don't do what I ask!"

Exchanging speaking glances, both cops lowered their weapons fractionally, still ready for action, but now slightly less threatening for the panicky young man.

"OK, son. So, why don't you tell us what you want, huh? No one needs to get hurt today unless you instigate it, OK?" Simon used his most calming and patient tone as he addressed his jittery target, hoping that perhaps for once the fraught situation could be defused quickly before any more harm could come to the unwilling principal players.

"What do I want?" Lewinsky almost screeched in angry disbelief. "I want my father released, that's what I want! Do that, and I let Dr Sandburg go. Fair exchange, OK? Because my father's innocent, whatever *he* says! What does he know about my father? It's all psychobabble and bullshit!" and he gave the lax body in his arms a shake as he cast a quick, furious glance down at the Blair's pallid face.

Suddenly, Jim went on high alert, even as Lewinsky's face took on a look of utter horror. "Oh, no. No!" the young man cried out, echoing Jim's own roar of anguish. "He's not breathing! *He's stopped breathing!*" and dropping the pistol on the bed, he instinctively pushed backwards and away from Blair, hands raised in surrender as Jim flew across the room to enfold his Guide in his arms.

Leaving Simon to take custody of the distraught Lewinsky, Jim turned his whole attention onto Blair, already noting the slowing and increasingly irregular heartbeats. “Medic! Medic, now!” he roared, even as he laid the limp body down flat so he could begin CPR. “Breathe, baby! Breathe!” he muttered, in between puffing life-giving air into the struggling lungs and doing chest compressions, not halting his ministrations until the EMTs burst into the cabin to take over from him.

It seemed like an eternity to the terrified Sentinel until the EMTs managed to stabilise his Guide enough to transport him to hospital. Although breathing shallowly again, Blair looked frighteningly fragile behind the oxygen mask covering most of his face, and the labouring of his lungs and chest hurt his Sentinel’s ears. “He’s drowning again,” Jim whispered brokenly to Simon as the big captain squeezed his shoulder in mute consolation. “He’s drowning in the fluid collecting in his lungs. Oh, god, Simon. How can he ever pull through this?”

“He’ll pull through because he wants to, Jim,” Simon replied, praying that he was correct in his belief. “He won’t leave you if he can help it, so don’t you dare give up on him! You hear me?”

And he was just a little bit relieved when Jim nodded distractedly in assent, his attention fixed firmly on the gurney bearing his beloved Guide out to the ambulance which was going to carry him to a clearing large enough for the urgently summoned air ambulance to land in, time being of the essence where the dangerously sick young patient was concerned. And no way was Blair going anywhere without Jim, so it was as well that no one made any attempt to prevent the big cop from climbing in after the gurney, and taking up his position next to his best friend.

Part 5: A Long-Term Strategy:

Several hours later, Cascade General ICU:



A haggard and exhausted Jim stared fixedly at the motionless figure on the bed, willing his partner and Guide to open his eyes. As he scanned the younger man’s physiological reactions for the umpteenth time, his thoughts tumbled in frustrated but ultimately futile cycles as he railed against the appalling luck which dogged his undeserving friend. How many more times must they endure this scenario? Simon had once remarked dryly that Sandburg ought to be awarded frequent flyer points for the number of times he had visited Cascade General, and Jim knew only too well that he hadn’t been joking. But Jim had honestly believed that in Blair’s new role as a consultant he would be less likely to encounter the sort of dangerous situations he had endured

while riding with Jim as an observer, and certainly less than if he had become a cop. But apparently not. Apparently he could bring down trouble on his head all by himself, just by doing his job to the best of his ability. And that included teaching as much as profiling, as evidenced by the Ventriss debacle and the mess stirred up by that smart-assed kid Alec something-or-other. Who was it said that no good deed goes unpunished? It was a conundrum for which Jim's tired brain had no answer yet, so all he could do was sit and wait. Wait for his friend's eyes to open again so they could talk. Really talk about where they should go from here. He refused to even consider the possibility that those beautiful blue eyes would remain closed for ever.

Because Jim knew he couldn't go on like this. Neither of them could, it was just too much. Or not enough, depending on your point of view. But he still hoped against hope that the answer didn't involve Blair leaving him in any shape or form. That was something he couldn't bear to contemplate, even if it was arguably for Blair's own good. The Sentinel couldn't function without the Guide, and Jim knew himself to be too selfish to want to live without his best friend. A best friend he would dearly like to become even more special, given just one more chance to prove it, and the courage to tell him so.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't register another presence until there was a gentle tap on the cubicle's window. He glanced up to see Megan's worried face peering in at him, so he quietly rose to his feet and exited the room, knowing that hospital regulations didn't allow for more than one visitor at a time for ICU patients, even if he had unofficial special dispensation to stay as long as he liked.

Gently taking Megan's arm, he steered her over to a couple of spare chairs in the corridor outside Blair's cubicle and they sat close together, taking comfort from their proximity.

Gazing into Jim's weary face, her own expression one of deep concern, Megan took his hand in an uncharacteristic display of physical affection and support. Snorting softly at the gesture, Jim met her quizzical gaze, murmuring, "Sorry, Megs. It's just that I know you're really worried when you're holding my hand instead of whacking me across the shoulders! But it's good to see you."

"Oh my word, Jimbo! I had to come, you know that! I need to know how Sandy's doing, and you too, mate. I knew you'd be here. As if anyone could prise you away from him. But seriously, Jimbo, how is he? Everyone's worried sick in MCU, and there's a fair few of my new co-workers in Homicide asking after him too, not to mention all the admin staff. He's a popular little guy, isn't he?"

"Yeah, that he is Megs, despite everything. Everything I've put him through. But you don't want to hear about my pity-party," he added with a rueful chuckle.

"Anyhow, I'll tell you what I can so you can report back. And thank everyone on Blair's behalf for their good wishes, huh? So, as you can probably guess, he's got double pneumonia, and is on an IV of heavy-duty antibiotics. He was borderline hypothermic when he was admitted, and dehydrated. Apparently Lewinsky stripped him because he wanted him to suffer, and only dressed him when he realised that he'd gone too far. Didn't want his hostage to die on him before he got what he wanted, I guess," he added, his face contorted with disgust.

"Anyway, Blair was already suffering from exposure from that first abduction, so it didn't take much for him to succumb to a chest infection, and then to the real thing. But what's really bothering the doc is the concussion he suffered when Lewinsky knocked him about. He hasn't really woken properly, even though the scans show no signs of intracranial bleeding or swelling. It's just a horrible combination of ills, any one of which could be dangerous on its own, but together? The poor kid's got a fight on his hands, for sure." And Jim lapsed into silence, the grief etched on his face terrible to see.

"Oh, Jimbo, I'm so sorry, love. I didn't know about the concussion. Bri just told me about the pneumonia, which is bad enough. I don't think he and H realised just how badly Sandy got beaten. They're going to be so worried. They're sure to want to visit as soon as Sandy's up to it, but meanwhile they're dealing with the aftermath of the arrest. Simon's finally given up and gone home to get some sleep, and Joel's holding the fort until he gets back. But no one expects to see you until Blair's on the mend, love, so no worries there. And that's straight from the horse's mouth, Jimbo, because I saw Simon briefly before he went home. He was practically dead on

his feet, the poor bugger,” she finished, her face and voice conveying wry sympathy as she tried to inject a little lightness into the grim atmosphere surrounding them.

Appreciating the gesture, Jim smiled sadly and patted the hand still holding his. “Thanks, Megs. It’s good to know that I’ve got the captain’s blessing, even though he’s well aware that this is where I’m going to be camping out until Blair wakes up. Even the medical staff accept it for what it is, thank god, otherwise there’d be trouble!” and he chuckled wryly again, although his eyes were suspiciously shiny with unshed tears.

Reaching up to touch his cheek with a gentle hand, Megan offered him a sad grin as she murmured gamely, “That’s right, Jimbo! You tell ‘em. But I have to go, I’m afraid. I’m supposed to be following up on a couple of leads for one of my cases, but I had to come here first to see you both.”

Rising to her feet, she moved over to the window to gaze in at her best mate lying so still on the bed, partially elevated to relieve the pressure on his lungs; his face ghost-white around the oxygen tubing in his nose where it wasn’t discoloured by bruising. “Shit, Jimbo, he looks awful!” she couldn’t help but murmur, but then she turned and looked Jim in the eye, her face taking on a determined expression.

“But he’s going to be fine, Jimbo, you’ll see. Doesn’t matter what the medics think, he’s got you, and that’s all he needs! No worries. And we’ve got your back too, mate. You’ve got to stay well so you can take care of Sandy, after all.” And with a final, reassuring squeeze of Jim’s shoulder, she turned and marched purposefully off down the corridor, leaving a rather bemused and emotional but very grateful man watching her departure.

Later still, Jim was roused from an exhausted doze by the quiet movements of one of the ICU night nurses as she took Blair’s vitals and adjusted his IVs. Jim had fallen asleep sitting in the visitor’s chair beside the bed, holding Blair’s hand, his forehead drooping to rest on the bed beside Blair’s blanket-covered thigh. Although the staff had very thoughtfully brought in a more comfortably upholstered chair for him, better than the usual hard plastic type, he still couldn’t quite suppress the grunt of pain elicited by aching and protesting muscles as he straightened up in his seat, grinning ruefully in response to the nurse’s sympathetic smile.

“How are you feeling, Jim?” she murmured softly in deference to the late hour. “You could always take a nap in the lounge if you want, you know. The couches are probably a good deal more comfortable than that chair, and you could at least lie down.

“But then again,” she answered herself, “I suppose it’s no good even suggesting it is it? Not until Sleeping Beauty here wakes up properly, huh?”

And Jim just had to offer her a small but grateful smile as he replied, “You got it, Barbara. I just hope it will be soon. I hate seeing him like this, especially as there doesn’t seem to be any reason for his continued unconsciousness. Normally he’s never still, even when he sleeps. But he’ll want to see me when he does wake up, so I’m here for the duration.”

“I understand, Jim. And for what it’s worth, we all believe that your presence helps him. Keeps him calm. Because I feel sure he knows you’re here, keeping watch over him so he can concentrate on getting the healing sleep he needs. But as I need to do a few more routine procedures for him, why don’t you take the opportunity to have a bathroom break if you need it, and get yourself some coffee? There’s a fresh pot at the nurses’ station, so help yourself.”

And though he was still reluctant to leave Blair’s side even for such a short time, Jim knew he should make the most of the chance to go, and that Barbara would stay with Blair until he got back.

“Thanks, Barbara. I’ll take you up on that. It’ll do me good to stretch my legs a bit.” So saying, he stood to leave, but not before leaning down to whisper into Blair’s ear, “Now you behave yourself, Chief. No annoying the pretty nurse, OK? I’ll be back in a few.”

Leaving Barbara chuckling in his wake, he quietly let himself out of the cubicle and headed for the bathroom, his long legs appreciating the chance to work the stiffness out of muscles cramped up from staying too long in one position.

After taking care of business, Jim washed his hands and face, the cool water refreshing as he looked up to study his reflection in the mirror above the vanity with a critical eye. He certainly looked haggard and worn, with deep shadows under his eyes, but he could have looked worse, he supposed. At least he had had a chance to change his clothes and wash up, and have something to eat, thanks to the kindness of his colleagues who had made the effort to visit whenever they could. Both Rafe and H had dropped by before they left for home, promising that they would call in again tomorrow, and Joel had swung by the loft to grab a change of clothes and some basic toiletries for Jim as he knew very well that there was no way the Sentinel would leave his Guide's side until Blair was truly on the mend. And Megan had also come back with sandwiches and snacks for which Jim was very grateful even if he had little appetite. It wouldn't do to keel over from lack of sustenance, and the ICU staff kept him supplied with fresh coffee.

They weren't the only visitors, though, and during the hours Blair had been here, Jim had been gratified by the number of friends and colleagues from departments other than MCU who made the effort to check on their young consultant, although he suspected that Blair himself had no idea of how much love and affection he inspired in others.

Drying his hands and face, he left the bathroom, to almost bump into Simon, who was striding determinedly down the corridor towards Blair's cubicle.

"Hey, Simon, you're looking much better!" Jim grinned as he looked his boss up and down, pleased to see that the bigger man had obviously managed to get some sleep, and a chance to freshen up. "You're looking almost normal again," he added in tired humour.

"Which is more than can be said for you!" came the snippy rejoinder, except that Simon's eyes betrayed his genuine concern for his exhausted subordinate.

"Having said that," he continued more gently, "I'm glad that at least the gang have managed to feed and clothe you, Jim. And I'm sorry not to have gotten here sooner, but after I'd had a bit of a nap, I wanted to catch up on the follow-up to Lewinsky's arrest so I could fill you in.

"But all that aside for now, how's the kid doing? Has he woken properly yet?" and again his concern bled through in his worried enquiry.

"Not so much a kid, now, Simon," Jim remarked quietly as he turned to accompany his friend back towards Blair's cubicle. "Guess he's the wrong side of thirty to be called 'kid' anymore."

"Huh! He'll always be a kid compared to us old stagers!" Simon replied with a mock frown. "But seriously, his quick mind and his attitude to life will always make him seem youthful. Even in old age!"

"You're right, of course, boss. But to get back to your question, no, he hasn't woken properly yet, but I feel as if it won't be long now. Don't ask me how I know, I just do."

"More Sentinel voodoo bullshit, I suppose!" Simon grumped, but his eyes were twinkling with mirth as he said it.

They arrived at Blair's door just as Barbara was finishing her routine tasks and was making Blair as comfortable as possible. She agreed to let both men sit in with him for a while, as she knew they wouldn't abuse the privilege and disturb her patient unduly, both of them being obviously very protective of him.

As Jim took up his customary position at the head of Blair's bed, automatically reaching to take hold of the lax hand lying nearest to him on the covers, Simon pulled up another chair alongside him, frowning as he studied the comatose young man lying there, so unnaturally still and silent. Blair's much shorter curls fluffed out around his head, giving him an even more youthful appearance than usual, but the heavy beard stubble contrasted dramatically with the pale skin of the unmarked portions of his face, while the long, dark lashes of his closed lids fanned out above shadows like bruises beneath his eyes. Simon knew that beneath the blankets, Blair's body bore the marks of a vicious beating, although Jim had assured him that there were no bones broken, and no internal damage other than deep bruising. However, Blair's ribs had sustained some heavy blows, so that wasn't going to help him any once he was awake enough to cough, which was a necessary evil under the circumstances,

as they were sadly only too well aware. Simon could foresee some strong painkillers in Blair's near future, whether the kid liked it or not, and he was equally certain that this time Blair wouldn't be bouncing back as quickly as he usually did. This had been way too close.

But at least Simon realised he was thinking positively now in terms of his young friend's recovery, whereas when he had first seen Blair's unconscious body in the cabin, he had been momentarily terrified that they were too late to save him, especially during those fraught moments when he had stopped breathing. *And how Jim could bear seeing his partner like that without totally freaking out, I don't know*, Simon thought to himself. *With his sentinel senses, he had to be far more aware of the real scale of Blair's physical condition than us mere mortals. Thank God he had the self-control and medical training to help Blair immediately when he needed it. All that time in the military has to be good for something! Then again, he's pulled off a miracle before....* And he couldn't quite contain the slight shudder that ran through him as he flashed back to that dreadful scene on the wet grass next to a certain fountain.

But he wasn't going to talk about that now. He was sure that even deeply unconscious patients could hear what was said to them to a certain extent, so now was not the time to offer nothing but doom and gloom. Keeping his voice low, he decided that Jim would probably appreciate being brought up to speed on the aftermath of the arrest so far, after which he could focus his full attention on his partner again.

"Well, Jim, I have to say I've seen him look better, but as long as you're here, I'm sure he'll eventually respond to you. The connection between you two is the strongest I've ever seen in partners, and if I understood you right, it's going to get even closer.

"But before I go and leave you two in peace, I'll just give you a quick run-down on what's happening to Lewinsky, OK?"

Looking up from his contemplation of Blair's face to offer his friend a tired smile, Jim murmured, "Yeah, thanks Simon. I'd like to hear what's going on, so I can tell Blair when he wakes. I know he'll want to know. Hell, he'll probably be more concerned about Lewinsky than himself!"

"You got that right, Jim! He's nothing if not empathetic even towards scum who don't deserve his interest. But anyway, you can tell him that Lewinsky has been admitted to Conover's secure wing for a psych eval before arraignment. I know that probably won't satisfy you, my friend, but I have to say that I understand why after interviewing the guy myself. He definitely has issues - some form of mental instability - which was probably always there; just needed a stimulus severe enough to set him off. And I guess the shock of finding he has a murderous father would fit the bill.

"Thing is, when he was reunited with his mother - who's a very nice lady, by the way - at first he wanted nothing to do with her. Kept saying we were all wrong, and that Masterson was misunderstood, not guilty. But then he changed abruptly, and just fell apart. Started crying and screaming, couldn't seem to comprehend that he'd hurt someone as badly as he hurt Sandburg. It was like he overloaded, and we had to call in a doctor to sedate him. When he calmed down some, he wanted to apologise to his mom, but after that, wouldn't say another word. Just shut down. Total la-la land. It was the weirdest thing. And that's when he got shipped off to Conover. And of course I'll keep you informed as to how it goes from there. But whether he'll ever be considered fit for trial, well, your guess is as good as mine."

Jim regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, and then his lips lifted in a sardonic half-grin.

"Know what, Simon? Right now all I need to know is that he's off the streets, and liable to stay that way for some time to come. He might well be inherently unstable, like you say. Maybe treatable in time? Who knows? But his father is out and out evil. And I truly believe that he's sane enough to convict, at least. Let's hope so, anyhow, because he knows exactly what he was doing. But I tell you this. If he ever does get out, he won't get the chance to kill again!"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Detective," and Simon regarded him soberly for a moment before determinedly shaking off his uneasiness. "And on that note I'll leave you both in peace. Take care of him, Jim, but get some rest yourself as well. You're going to need it when he's back home."

Once Simon had left the room, Jim turned his full attention back on his Guide. Certainly, he was grateful for Simon's interest and care for them both, and for the information he had provided, but Jim was glad to be alone with Blair. Alone to talk, and try to explain to his still sleeping partner what he felt, and what he had discovered about himself. And maybe, just maybe, if he talked long enough, Blair would hear him and answer. That was the response he really hoped and prayed for, whatever it turned out to be.

Keeping his voice down just enough to ensure that he couldn't be overheard by anyone but his Guide, he took a deep, cleansing breath and began.

"OK, Blair. Chief. It's time I told you what is really going on inside this thick head of mine. The first thing you need to know is that I love you, babe. Have done for a long time. I mean, I'm *in love* with you, but was too stupid and stubborn to see it for what it was. See, like I always said; I expect anyone I really care for to leave me. Either by death, or divorce, whatever, it doesn't matter. They all go and I expected you to be just one more in a long line of disappointments. But you've completely thrown me for a loop, Chief. Whatever shit I've pulled on you, you've always hung on in there. I accused you of betraying my trust, when that fault was mine. And I assumed that you couldn't – wouldn't – commit to me for longer than it took to get your doctorate. Gods, was I wrong there! I've gotten you shot, beaten, kidnapped, and even killed, and still, you're there for me.

"But this time. This time I feel as if it might be one hurt too far, Blair. Even as good and strong a friend as you must have a breaking point, and without a good reason to stay, I can't blame you if you finally give up and follow the rest. But I'm asking you, begging you, to please give me one more chance. One more chance to tell you how I truly feel about you and what you mean to me.

"So here goes, Chief. This is me, finally confessing what you deserved to hear years ago. I love you, babe. And not just as my friend and Guide. I know you'll always be there for me when I need you, even if you decide that you can't stay at the PD anymore. If it's just too much, and you need to step back from the hurt and the danger; because god knows, you've had more than your fair share of that.

"But I feel that if you could possibly see your way to staying with me – *being with me* – in all ways, I think we would be so much stronger. I don't think these senses will work without you, babe, but if I don't have you, then I don't want them anyway, whatever I might have said in the past in a fit of temper. In a way, I really do need you to define what I am, and can finally admit it. But if you'll accept me; accept my offer for what it is, I think we'll both benefit. And I swear I'll try to never push you away again. You're the strongest man I know, babe, and at last I've found the courage to admit it out loud. I'm talking long-term commitment here, Blair. I want forever with you, as long as that's what you want too.

"I love you, Chief. Please come back soon so I can tell you properly. I want to hear your answer, whatever it is. Come back, baby. I need you, and I love you more than life itself. For *you*, babe. Not just for what you do for me as a Guide in the name of friendship and duty."

Blair was comfy. Warm and pain-free in a cocoon of darkness. Floating in a drowsy, dream-like state, he idly considered his present situation. *Am I dying again? Could be, I guess. But it's different from last time. No jungle, although I think I can make out a speck of light in the distance. Is it getting bigger? Calling to me, just like before? And nope, I'm not a wolf this time. And no sign of Jim's jaguar either. So, perhaps it's OK to go this time. I mean, if Jim truly wanted or needed me, he'd have said so by now. Heck, it's been three years since the 'diss-aster' and although we're still friends, it hasn't grown into anything more. And I'm so tired. So tired of trying so hard to make myself seen and heard. I've done my best, I can't do anymore. I'll always be grateful for Jim's forgiveness and forbearance, but I feel so thin. Stretched. Just like Frodo in 'The Lord of the Rings'. And if he'd had the energy, he might even have chuckled self-deprecatingly at that fanciful analogy.*

No, he'd made up his mind. Time to go. Time to embrace the light, and the everlasting peace it offered.

But then he heard a beloved voice. A voice he couldn't ignore. Calling him back, pleading with him to return. And he knew he had to obey.

And suddenly it was as if he was drowning again. The comforting darkness became as the murky waters of the fountain, and he couldn't breathe. His lungs protested; he could feel them filling up with water. *Oh, not again! Please, not this way again!*

And then his eyes flew open, and he was coughing, coughing, and it hurt like an SOB. And Jim was there; holding him, supporting him, rubbing his back and murmuring soothing nonsense. And now he was coughing up such a disgusting mess, and it seemed to go on forever, and it hurt, oh, how it hurt! He was peripherally aware that there were others present, but Jim was all that mattered. All that would ever matter.

And when, eons later, he could finally draw breath, even if he couldn't speak, his eyes and expression said it for him, and Jim understood. *Love you. I'm here. I'm staying.*

Epilogue: The Promise of a Lifetime:

Some weeks later, the loft:

Supported by Jim's strong arm around his waist, Blair stood at the foot of the staircase leading up to the loft bedroom. In Jim's fond imagination, the expression on the still pale face was akin to that worn by someone contemplating an ascent of Everest, and he just had to grin at the thin-lipped frown of determination tempered with a touch of trepidation, which morphed into a comically quizzical glance as Blair's eyes met his.

"Sorry, babe, but it was the look on your face! It's not as bad as you think, you know. Not a mountain to climb. And you know, I could carry you if you want?"

And that earned him the response he expected, as Blair swatted half-heartedly at Jim's chest, growling, "That is so not happening, Big Guy! Just because I've lost a bit of weight and strength doesn't mean that I've suddenly turned into a damsel in distress. I can do this, Jim. I *want* to!"

"Then your wish is my command, babe. Let's do this, OK?" and he smiled approvingly as Blair nodded decisively and raised one foot to step on the first tread.

It took a while, and with Jim doing most of the work, but eventually they reached the top, and Jim lowered his smaller partner to sit the big bed. The look on Blair's face touched him deeply, as the younger man, although plainly exhausted and breathing heavily, grinned widely, justifiably proud of his achievement. And as for Jim, he couldn't have been more proud than if he was a Dad watching his kid complete his first bicycle ride without stabiliser wheels. It might seem like such a small accomplishment, but in effect, it marked a significant milestone in both Blair's return to health, and in their new and developing relationship.

"There you go, Chief," he murmured warmly as he pulled back the covers and helped Blair to lie down before tucking him in. "At last, I have you where I want you, my Pretty!" he added, affecting a lecherous smirk and twirling an imaginary moustache, laughing along with Blair at the younger man's amused snort. But there was no denying the tenderness and longing that suffused Blair's beautiful blue eyes as he held Jim's gaze, and Jim couldn't help but lean down to plant the gentlest and briefest of kisses on the lush lips offered up to him.

"Won't be long, babe. I'll just go and get your meds, lock up, and I'll be with you!" And as Blair burrowed his head further into the soft pillows with an answering hum of pleasure, Jim was as good as his word, completing his assigned tasks with alacrity, eager to hold his beloved in his arms in their shared bed for the first time.

As Jim climbed into bed, he gently pulled the still frail body of his soon-to-be lover into his arms, eliciting a sigh of pure contentment from the smaller man. Snuggling together for long minutes, Blair finally pulled back a little to gaze up into Jim's questioning eyes, a look of faint nervousness and apology on his mobile features.

"Hey, man, this is so great, you know? But I'm really sorry I can't do much yet. You've been so patient with me, and I want to reciprocate, but..." and he tailed off with a despondent sigh as he turned his face away a little, angry with himself for his on-going weakness.

But Jim was having none of it. "No, baby, don't you even think of apologising to me. This is wonderful, Chief. More than I ever expected or hoped for. Just being able to hold you properly in my arms at last – in our bed –

means more than I can say. The fact that you're still here with me means everything, so stop worrying, and let me cuddle you, OK?"

And of course Blair wasn't going to deny him that, and with a gentle kiss and a satisfied smile, he curled into his bigger partner's comforting arms, and settled down to sleep, already tired from the exertion of getting up here at last. Into the territory and personal space of the Sentinel he had yearned for for so many years.

Not really tired, but pleasantly relaxed, Jim settled contently down to enjoy the much-desired closeness he had dreamed about for longer than he cared to remember, lazily absorbing everything his senses could tell him about the man in his arms. To be sure, Blair was still quite severely underweight and tired easily, but he was definitely on the mend, even if he sometimes got depressed about how long it was taking him. As far as Jim was concerned, his Guide was 100% better already than the critically ill young man who had first been admitted to hospital, and was improving a little more each day.

But he couldn't help but reflect on their journey up to this point, because it certainly hadn't been easy on either of them.

Blair's waking in the hospital, although so very welcome, was only the beginning of what would be a hard road to recovery, despite Jim's care and support and Blair's own determination to return to full health and strength. Because now he knew for certain where he belonged, and that was with Jim. However, the concussion on top of the pneumonia, plus his generally run-down state, meant that the infection was slow to clear and kept him hospitalised for far longer than either of them wanted.

But Jim knew that in the long run the doctors had been right to insist that his Guide remain under observation, even if no longer in the ICU, having witnessed the aftermath of a frightening episode just before Blair had expected to be released. With plenty of offers from his and Blair's friends and colleagues to spell Jim for a short break so that he could return to the loft, shower, change, eat and grab a few hours' sleep in a proper bed, he had finally given in and succumbed to their – and Blair's – insistence.

And when he had returned, admittedly feeling much better in himself, it was to find Blair once again wearing an oxygen mask and in severe distress, having suffered a seizure in Jim's absence. Which of course meant that Jim was even more stubborn about not leaving Blair's side again, only giving in with extreme bad grace when Blair begged him to go, and when either Simon or Megan were on 'Blair-watch duty'.

As Jim monitored the sleeping body in his arms, he couldn't help but note the too-prominent bones beneath the soft skin, and he knew that even though Blair was now eating again, he still had a long way to go to get back to a healthy weight. It wasn't that he had deliberately avoided food, which he had been known to do in the past when too busy to eat, or too upset to bother. It was simply that often, when undergoing one of his frequent, if inevitable, violent coughing spells, the painful, wracking spasms more often than not made him sick, so that he lost whatever small amount of food he had managed to eat.

Nevertheless, he gradually fought back, and at least being more or less bed-bound meant that he and Jim had the opportunity to really talk. Well, for Jim to really talk, because often trying to talk brought on a coughing jag, so Blair was forced to curb his natural tendency to run off at the mouth.

Over the days of his hospitalisation, Blair learned far more about Jim and Jim's feelings than he had ever heard before, even after all their years under the same roof. And when he could, he reciprocated, knowing that he was also guilty of hiding so much of his own life and his past. As Simon had often said, not without frustration, Blair's verbal tap dancing was at virtuoso level, and his powers of obfuscation were the stuff of legend.

But what was even more satisfying to both men were the increasingly frequent and mutually welcome touches and caresses that Jim was able to bestow on his Guide which again were reciprocated when Blair was able. Although circumstances dictated that they couldn't indulge in anything overtly sexual, even if Blair had been up to it, even something as simple as holding Blair's hand while they talked was of great comfort to them both, and as far as the Sentinel was concerned, his senses had never felt so easy and natural. He realised that at long last he had accepted his gift for what it was and had stopped fighting it, and for the most part it was thanks to the never-ending support and encouragement of his Guide.

Of course, not everything was sweetness and light between them, and they would always have strong and differing opinions on plenty of topics, but not enough to drive a wedge between them ever again. For instance, Jim smiled a little ruefully as he recalled updating Blair on what was happening to Lewinsky, just before Blair was released from hospital. He had already explained about Lewinsky's breakdown, and expressed his gratification on learning from Simon that the young man was now officially incarcerated in Conover, and looked like staying there for some time.

And of course, he should have expected Blair to be upset. The gentle and kind-hearted younger man couldn't help but sympathise, despite what Lewinsky had put him through. As he tried to explain to a sceptical Sentinel, he could understand to a certain extent where Lewinsky was coming from.

"Don't you see, Jim? He grew up believing his father was dead, and the shock and amazement at finding he had one must have been extreme. And it's not surprising that he couldn't bring himself to believe that this long-lost parent was actually a murdering monster.

"Hell, I *know* what it's like to wonder who or what my father is or was, and although I mostly manage to convince myself that it doesn't matter after all this time, part of me would still like to know. And if it turned out that I had a monster as a father, goddess knows how I'd react!"

Jim had replied as best he could, although he knew for a fact that if it was ever decided that Lewinsky should be declared fit enough to stand trial, Blair wouldn't want to testify against him.

"Babe, you could never react like Lewinsky did. It's not in you. I know that as an absolute certainty. But if some day your father should turn up on the doorstep, I'm going to tell him some home truths about what he's missed in knowing you as the beautiful, intelligent and caring person that you are. His loss, babe, for sure!"

And he recalled the shine of grateful tears in Blair's eyes as he spoke, knowing that at least on that occasion he'd managed to say the right thing.

Slight changes in Blair's breathing and heart rate signalled that the smaller man was rousing from sleep, and he looked down into the drowsy, half-lidded blue eyes that peered myopically up at him from Blair's adorably sleep-soft face.

"Hey, man, can't you sleep? Is there anything I can do to help?" The throaty words were as balm to Jim's soul, and his expression was pure love as he answered.

"It's fine, Chief. I'm just enjoying lying here holding you. I'm in no hurry to drop off yet. Go back to sleep, babe."

But Blair pushed himself up onto one elbow as he smiled softly back at his big, warm personal Jim-pillow. "I'll be asleep again soon enough, man, but I love to hear you talk. I don't think I'll ever get enough of your voice now I can have you all to myself. You can tell me whatever you want, and I promise I'll always listen."

"You might change your mind about that at some point," Jim replied with a wry grin, "but there is something I want to say, if it doesn't sound too sappy." And at Blair's expectant look, he continued, just a little diffidently.

"It's just that I was thinking about that old saying, the one about absence making the heart grow fonder, and how right it is. I mean, over the years we've been separated from time to time, sometimes for some pretty awful reasons," and his expression hardened as he couldn't help but recall some of those instances, whether from kidnappings, misunderstandings or just plain bad luck.

"Anyhow, I realise now that each and every time I missed you, babe, even if I was too stubborn to admit it, even to myself. It's just that your presence quickly became something I depended upon, even if I took you for granted too often. But this time, this was one absence too many. It was a real wakeup call, and I finally recognised what had been right under my very nose for so long. I knew that I loved you; needed and wanted you; and I promised myself that as soon as I found you, I wouldn't go one more day without telling you exactly what you mean to me. And as soon as you're well enough, I'm going to show you, and keep showing you for the rest of our lives together."

And as a happy and relaxed Blair settled easily into his arms again, Jim was overjoyed to hear his quiet but fervent response.

“What more could I ask for, my Sentinel? The promise of a lifetime together. It’s the best, man. The very best. Nothing else matters.”

The End.