



For Need of a Guide

by Bluewolf

Three months after Blair's press conference
There was nothing left of what had been the most successful department in the Cascade Police
Department.

The well-meaning actions of one woman had destroyed two lives and - with various degrees of severity -
damaged several others, despite the efforts of one of the two who were destroyed to shoulder the entire
blame for what he had described as 'a good piece of fiction'.

Because, unfortunately, Major Crime's overwhelming success had caused a surprising amount of jealousy
- unsuspected by any of its personnel - in other departments, and it seemed that at least one of those
jealous detectives had seen, in the Press free-for-all regarding Jim's sentinel abilities and Blair's

subsequent press conference denying his work, an opportunity for his own advancement - and found a way to use it.

Sitting at his new desk in his new office ex-Captain Simon Banks knew that at least he - and Brown, Rafe and Taggart - had skills they could use, skills that should make their new careers as private investigators successful. The Police Commissioner was not so petty that he didn't understand - after the shit hit the fan - why they had kept Detective Jim Ellison's sensory abilities secret, even though he had to be seen to do something about it, and Simon knew that Norris would almost certainly quietly direct some business in their direction. Indeed, Norris had been surprisingly supportive. Simon had tried to defend the others, pointing out that they hadn't known, but to no avail. The entire MC department had been fired. Even his secretary Rhonda had been dismissed.

Megan Connor had been sent back to Australia, the first of them to go. Although she had been allowed to stay on in Cascade after the period of her exchange was officially over, Norris had simply told her that, much as they appreciated the work she had done for them, it was now time she went home.

The others had been allowed to work out their period of notice.

At least, Simon reflected, none of the evidence they had ever presented in court had been obtained by using Jim's senses. If any convicted criminal managed to hold out for a retrial, the evidence would show that the original conviction was sound.

Of course, Jim wouldn't be available to give evidence.

Simon would have been happy to include Jim - and Blair - as members of Banks' Investigations - but...

After they offered him a badge, Blair pointed out that his credibility had been shot to hell; therefore, much though he appreciated the offer, he felt it would be a mistake to accept it; left the bullpen, ostensibly to go home - and had simply disappeared, leaving everything he owned, including the things he had removed from Rainier, in his room, apart from his car, which he had left in the PD parking garage.

Naomi had watched Blair leave the bullpen, then surprised everyone by collapsing in tears. She had sobbed her heart out on Rhonda's shoulder, and when she had regained control of herself she looked at Jim. "I'm sorry," she said. "I only wanted to help Blair. I never dreamed that Sid..." Her voice broke.

"We know," Jim said gently.

He took her back to the loft, where she collected her things, said she'd be in touch, and left, refusing Jim's offer to take her to wherever she was going. Watching her go, Jim saw her wave down a taxi, get into it, and then, before it had gone out of sight, it had been involved in a collision with another vehicle that turned out of a side street, at speed, without warning, and run into it. Jim rushed out of the loft, barely remembering to slam the door shut as he went, and ran down the street.

People were already easing the occupants of the two vehicles out of them - smoke rising from one of the engines explained why; even as Jim registered the possibility of fire, there was a flicker of flame and within seconds the wreckage was a flaming mass.

He dropped to his knees beside Naomi. She blinked pain-filled eyes at him, murmured weakly, "Tell Blair... I'm sorry. I love hi..." She went limp, and Jim knew that she was dead.

But Jim wasn't able to tell Blair; for Blair didn't return home.

In Blair's absence Jim had arranged Naomi's funeral, which was delayed for some days by an investigation into the driver of the car that hit the taxi. He turned out to be very, very drunk, and faced a charge of causing death by dangerous driving once he had recovered from his injuries - if indeed he did recover. Three months later, to the best of Simon's knowledge the man was still in a coma. The taxi driver had lost a leg, and considered that under the circumstances he had been lucky.

Simon had also taken charge of Blair's car (and, later, Jim's truck) - these were currently sitting in the parking lot of the office block where Simon had rented space. He and the others used them, partly to keep them in good running order, partly to change the vehicles they were using.

In the short time available to them before they found themselves dismissed from the PD, the members of Major Crime (assigned cold cases rather than any new ones in case they might be called to give evidence, once they were no longer cops) pulled out all the stops looking for Blair, without success.

Jim had gone to the break room for a coffee two days before his official final day at the PD and, while sitting drinking it, had collapsed, apparently unconscious; he hadn't regained consciousness, and after a few days his father had arranged for him to go into care. Simon suspected that Jim had simply zoned out on something, and without Blair to call him back he would remain zoned out indefinitely.

Simon had spent part of his time making arrangements for starting a PI business, and with that set up they busied themselves continuing to look for Blair, still without success. Even when, surprisingly quickly, they started to get work, Joel, Brown and Rafe concentrated on that, while Simon continued the search for Blair.

"This is ridiculous!" Simon muttered to himself as he considered the total lack of results.

"Blair learned a lot when he was riding with Jim," Rhonda offered. "Including how to stay under the radar."

"I know," Simon said. "But I can't help thinking... Just disappearing like that - with no word to Jim... The Blair Sandburg I knew wouldn't do that. Oh, he might have headed off if he felt Jim would be better off without him, but the more I think about it... he wouldn't have just disappeared. He'd have let Jim know he was leaving. But he didn't..."

Rhonda frowned. "Are you thinking... maybe he didn't leave?" She put just a little stress on the 'leave'.

"If he was going to just up and leave... wouldn't he have taken his car, rather than abandon it in the PD garage? Even if he then ditched it at - say - the airport, whether or not he flew out of Cascade."

"You think someone in the PD... well, kidnapped him?" Rhonda asked.

"Someone had the clout to get all the Major Crime detectives fired, despite our success rate," Simon muttered. "Someone who could go over Commissioner Norris's head. Norris understood - I'll swear Norris understood. He would have had to do something - authorize an IA investigation of all Jim's cases, at worst, to make sure nobody could look for a retrial and an acquittal based on the gathering of evidence collected by nothing but Jim's senses. But left to himself, he wouldn't have fired any of us, let alone all of us."

"But Blair said..." Rhonda trailed off.

"Did you believe that, Rhonda?"

"No... I don't think any of us did. But we know Blair - "

"So did the authorities at Rainier, but they kicked him out based on his denial of the facts in his dissertation. Though from something Jim said to me, before he zoned out - "

"Zoned out?" Rhonda asked.

"He explained it to me just after the Switchman case. You know how it's possible to get so involved in what you're doing that you... well, don't really notice what's going on around you? You could be walking down the street thinking about what you're going to have for dinner, so intent on your thoughts that you walk past your best friend or a member of your family without seeing them?"

"It's happened."

"A sentinel can get so involved using one sense that he totally loses touch with reality - that 'walk past someone without seeing them' is enhanced too. Blair called it a zone out. I don't know what Jim zoned on that day he collapsed, but whatever it was - I'd guess he could have heard something, and he's still so busy trying to hear it that nothing else exists."

"If you know that - "

"Why don't I do something?" Simon smiled wryly. "I tried, but I'm not Blair. That was what Blair did, why Jim needed him; he helped Jim control his senses. I pulled Jim out of a zone once or twice by punching him, but you can't really do that in a hospital. Megan might have been able to do something - Blair suggested to me a while ago that she'd be a good partner for Jim if Blair himself was out of the picture - but of course she was sent back to Australia, the first victim of the 'get rid of the MC liars' campaign.

"But anyway - based on something Jim said, I don't think everyone at Rainier believed Blair out and out lied in his dissertation. Exaggerated what Jim could do, possibly. But Blair had clashed with Chancellor Edwards a couple of times, so she seized the chance... And of course what she did was totally wrong; Blair should have been given the chance to meet with his dissertation committee, explain what he'd said... "

"Why do I get the feeling that someone has known about Jim for a while, and for some reason has been acting against him - and Blair - since the whole situation arose? From what you said, Blair has been his main support."

"You could be right," Simon agreed. "But damned if I know what we can do about it."

Just after Blair's press conference

Captain of Homicide Grant Preston gave a satisfied sigh as he put down his coffee cup and placed his napkin carefully on the table. "My congratulations to your chef, Andrew. I haven't had a meal half as good since the last time I visited you."

State Governor Andrew Welsh smiled. "I know we don't see each other as often now as we did when we were children, Grant, but we are both busy men. Neither of us has time to socialize outside the demands of our work."

Preston nodded, his suspicions confirmed by his cousin's last sentence. This invitation - ostensibly for a meal and a cousinly get-together - had an underlying purpose.

"I imagine you have already guessed that I want to consult with you about something," Welsh continued.

"It does seem fairly obvious," Preston agreed. He sighed. "You know, though, sometimes I miss those days when we were young and carefree and spent time together just for the fun of it. Those were good days."

"Before responsibility took over our lives? But would you really wish for a job with less responsibility?"

"There are times when I would like to pass the buck... I'm sure you feel the same. But the responsibility is ours; we accepted it. I'm not entirely sure that either of us knew exactly what we were ultimately signing up for, back when I went to the police academy and you entered politics, but even back then we were both ambitious... "

"And ambition doesn't go away," Welsh finished.

"No, it doesn't," Preston agreed. "So - why did you want to see me?"

"That media furor a few days ago about one of the Cascade detectives being what they called a sentinel?"

Preston scowled. "And then yesterday the observer who had written the thing said he'd made it all up."

"Do you believe that?"

Preston opened his mouth, had second thoughts and closed it again. After a moment he went with his third thought. "Ellison's a pretty efficient detective; I have to admit that. In fact, the whole of Major Crime is pretty good, and there are quite a few detectives in other departments who think MC's success makes them, their departments, look bad. Sandburg - the observer - he's been riding along with Ellison for about four years now, and Ellison - well, he has a reputation for not suffering fools gladly. For being a real hard ass. Yet even after Sandburg went public about making up everything that his book said was fact, Ellison didn't tell him to get lost, which is what I would've expected."

"As if there was more truth to it than he was willing to admit?"

"Andrew... Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"That I believe the story? I'm not sure. But... You remember my cousin John? My aunt Jenna's son?"

Preston thought for a moment. He was an only child who had no other cousins; he and Andrew, who was also an only child, had been quite close when they were young, each the other's main friend. But he half remembered, once or twice, they had been joined by another boy Andrew had introduced as another cousin.

"Vaguely," he said.

"I didn't see very much of John when we were growing up," Welsh admitted. "Enough to know him when I met him, but that was about it. Aunt Jenna and Uncle Gavin lived in Tacoma, and only visited occasionally. Anyway, unlike the two of us, John wasn't particularly ambitious - he does have his own business, selling cars for a living and doing very well, though it does seem a terrible waste of his intelligence. Any idiot can sell cars. It doesn't give him any prestige, any influence... But ignore that.

"He's got two children, John Junior and Jasmine."

"So?" Preston prompted when his cousin fell silent.

"John contacted me when that publisher began to push excerpts from Sandburg's book. He said that his son... " He hesitated. "They'd noticed, when Johnny was very young, that he could hear very well, and see things clearly at a distance where nobody else could see anything but just shapes. After he could read, he could read what was on a road sign before anyone else was more than half aware that there *was* a sign somewhere up ahead. He was an extremely fussy eater. His attention span was very variable; sometimes he seemed to be paying attention to something a long way away, and they had to shake him to pull his attention back from whatever he was fixated on and back to... well, where he was. The doctors had him diagnosed as autistic, but John said he was never convinced that it was an accurate diagnosis. The doctors suggested sending Johnny to a school that dealt with - well, psychological disorders, but John chose to have him home schooled, and apparently he reacted very positively to his lessons.

"Once he was old enough John took him into his business - apparently he's pretty good at identifying a car that's been neglected, needs a lot of work, and what work needs to be done, just by the sound. It's helped give the business an excellent reputation.

"When John saw those excerpts from Sandburg's book Berkshire was putting out, he began wondering if Johnny might be one of those sentinels."

Preston thought about it for a minute. "You'd need to ask Sandburg... "

"And if he lied about his work, he had to have a solid reason, considering the sort of deal a firm like Berkshire would be offering him. He'll stick with that denial. He isn't likely to change his story just because I'm the state governor."

"If I could get hold of Sandburg for you... Would you care if it was using less than... well, ethical means?"

"No - and I didn't hear you say that," Welsh said.

They grinned at each other.

Two or three days after the press conference

To say that Blair was startled by the offer of a detective's badge would be an understatement; he had assumed that - at best - he would be quietly asked to leave, and had chosen to save Simon the embarrassment of having to do so by going in at a time when he knew most of the detectives who weren't on injury-related leave would be out, and leaving his observer's badge on Simon's desk. Only Joel had seen him and delayed him, and then everyone - including Naomi! - had walked in.

He had looked - yes, longingly, at the detective's badge, listened to what Simon had to say, then, sadly, reluctantly, shaken his head. "I appreciate the offer, Captain, more than I can say, but I can't believe I have any credibility left. Any time I had to give evidence in court, the defense lawyers would have a field day pointing out that I was a self-confessed fraud. I'd guess you had to call in quite a few favors to persuade the Commissioner I was worth a badge, and I'm sorry that it was wasted effort - but I really think it would be a mistake for me to accept it." He looked at Jim. "See you later, man." He turned away and left the bullpen, keeping his head high with an effort.

He took the elevator to the parking garage and walked over to where he had left his car, taking his key from his pocket as he went. But he never reached it. Intent on his thoughts, he didn't hear footsteps behind him; the first he knew of the presence of someone else was when something was thrown over his head - something fairly loose that fell around his shoulders as well and hampered his arm movements as he tried to turn and defend himself. He felt a sharp prick on his hand and had time to think that the hand wasn't usually considered the most efficient place to inject anything before whatever it was did take effect and he felt his legs give way, though he wasn't aware of hitting the ground.

His captor lifted him and carried him to a nearby car, opened a rear door and pushed him in; closed the door, went back quickly to scoop up Blair's car key, then walked briskly to Blair's car, drove it to the most distant corner of visitors' parking, locked it again and returned to his own car. He slipped the cover off Blair's head and slipped the key into the unconscious man's pocket, then removed the latex gloves he was wearing, pushing them into his pocket; got into his car and drove off.

Blair lay, half awake, on what he registered as a very comfortable surface.

Memory suddenly connected and he opened his eyes. He looked around, as best he could without moving his head - he had no idea if he were being watched, and decided he wanted to know as much as possible about where he was before his captors realized he was awake.

He appeared to be in a reasonably-sized room - there was a television set in one corner, and a comfortable-looking armchair positioned where its occupant could relax while watching it. Beside the chair was a low desk with a laptop, but Blair was certain that it would not be connected to the internet. On the other side of the chair was a small table. Between the couch and the television there was an electric fire, and on the other side of the fire there was a bookcase almost full of books. He was, as far as he could make out, lying on a proper bed, not a couch; so this room was laid out as a bed-sitting room? On the wall facing him was a long window, but lying down as he was he could only see the sky.

The bed stood against a wall, and there seemed to be a door between the foot of the bed and the wall with the window. A bathroom? He couldn't see anything else without sitting up, so, resigned, he sat up, swinging his legs out of bed... and discovered that he was wearing a nightshirt... and there was a chain

fastened to one ankle. He looked down at it and saw that the other end was fixed to the floor beside the fire.

He tried to move to the door... and found that the chain wasn't quite long enough. He looked around the rest of the room.

On the fourth wall, against which the head of the bed was resting, were two more doors. Those he could reach. One was a walk-in closet with a number of neatly folded shirts, T-shirts and sweaters on a shelf - and below it, on hangers, were several kilts.

Kilts?

And then he realized - with a chain fastened to one ankle he wouldn't be able to wear trousers; but the chain wouldn't prevent him from wearing a kilt. That also explained the nightshirt.

Blair wasn't sure he really wanted to wear a kilt - especially since he would have to wear it in what he knew was the 'traditional' way, without underwear - but he quickly decided that when his captor came to see him, and presumably tell him why he had been kidnapped, it would be more dignified to be wearing what was designed to be outdoor clothing rather than a nightshirt. But before he tried to get dressed, he checked the other door. Yes - a bathroom - well, a shower room, though the floor would surely get quite wet if he had to wash with the shower door open enough to allow for the chain. And of course he wouldn't be able to close the outer door either, because of the chain.

Well, a wet floor wasn't his problem.

There was a reasonable selection of toiletries and an electric razor. He checked his reflection - assessed the amount of facial hair and decided he had probably been unconscious for around twenty-four hours. He didn't feel a pressing need to use the toilet, but he went anyway, then gave himself a quick shave and washed his face. He felt he needed a shower, but didn't want to be caught in the middle of showering - he guessed that his captors would check on him soon. Then he went back to the closet, where he selected a shirt and sweater and fastened a kilt around his waist. There was a selection of short-legged socks, but no shoes - or even slippers. He sighed and pulled on a pair of socks, then went back into the main room, glad that the floor was carpeted.

He crossed to the bookcase, and on the way realized that while he had been getting washed and dressed, someone had come in, very silently, and left a plate of sandwiches and a jug of coffee on the table, along with two bowls, one with packets of creamer and one with packets of sugar and artificial sweetener, and a cup and saucer. A cup, rather than a mug? And a saucer?

Well, one thing was clear; his captor was watching him, to know that he was awake. He glanced around the room, but could see nothing that said 'camera' - though all that meant was that any camera in the room was very well hidden.

A quick glance at the books showed that although there was a reasonable mix of subjects, all were fiction; he would struggle to find one that held any interest for him, and he moved to the seat.

It was indeed as comfortable as it looked. He switched on the television, and while it warmed up poured himself a mug of coffee and added a packet of creamer.

He flicked through the channels, finally settling on a travel program about Peru.

The sandwiches were excellent, with a mixture of fillings - meat, fish and salad - more than he could eat despite the length of time since his last meal. The coffee was excellent, although he would have preferred milk to the powdered creamer.

However, Blair decided as he ate, this was the strangest kidnap ever. All right, with the chain attached just above his ankle his movements were limited. He could reach the bed, the chair, the closet and

bathroom; he couldn't reach the other door, which he assumed was the one leading out of this room. He could reach the window, but not the entire length of it - once it neared the door the chain pulled him back. But he could see only a garden with a thick growth of trees around it. There was nothing he could see to indicate where he was. And in twenty-four hours he could have been taken anywhere.

He had been provided with clothes - several changes of clothes. The room was comfortable, he was being well fed. But for the chain, he could have been a guest in the house.

Why? Kidnap victims - prisoners - weren't normally treated so... so generously!

He ate about half of the sandwiches, pushed the plate away, and settled down to enjoy the rest of the coffee.

Only half of his attention was on the television; he had been to the area covered in the program, and could, without straining his imagination, recognize where the producers had substituted plausible fiction for hard fact, which would presumably have been harder to film. But it filled the emptiness of the room.

What was Jim doing? Looking for him, he was sure; but his captor clearly had money, and if he had been flown in a private plane to the other side of America - across the Pacific to Australia - or even just the few miles to Seattle or Vancouver, there would be no trail for Jim to follow.

And why had he been kidnapped? He had nothing - not even credibility any longer.

Mistaken identity? Had his kidnapper actually meant to take someone else, but made a mistake? It was possible... though in that case he would have expected to be just dumped somewhere when the mistake was discovered, rather than being placed in a very comfortable room and fed.

He concentrated for a moment on his physical reactions. He still felt just a little sleepy, probably the lingering effect of the drug he had been given in the PD garage. Apart from that... Apart from that, he felt fine.

Finishing the coffee, he put the cup down and leaned back as the program on Peru finished. He allowed the television to continue playing the next program; this one about the Egyptian pyramids. Not something he found particularly interesting, but it was better than sitting in silence, fruitlessly wondering why... who... where...

There was a quiet tap on the door and it opened to admit two men and a woman. She was carrying a tray on which was another jug of coffee, a bottle of water, a bowl, two cups, saucers, a coaster and a glass. She put the tray down on the table, put the bowl over the plate of uneaten sandwiches, the other contents of it onto the table, placed the empty jug, the empty whitener sachet and Blair's used cup and saucer on the tray, then walked out with it.

Blair looked at the two men thoughtfully, quietly assessing them. One was rather older than the other, and wore a smart, obviously expensive business suit, while the younger was slightly more casually dressed, wearing a sweater rather than a shirt and jacket, though his clothes also said 'money'. There was a faint resemblance between them - so, father and son?

Politeness made him switch off the television. Neither man made a move, however; and then the door opened again and the woman came back in carrying a small upholstered but armless chair; she put it down beside the desk, went out and returned with a second, identical chair which she put beside the first, then left again, to return once more with a small folding table which she placed beside the second chair. The younger man sat in the chair nearer the desk as she walked out again.

There was, Blair decided, something faintly stage-managed about it all.

The older man poured two cups of coffee and gave one to Blair, who was beginning to feel just a touch over-caffeinated. He accepted it with a murmur of thanks and added creamer; the other man added

creamer and sugar to his cup then sat, very upright, in the other chair, putting his cup and saucer on the small table. The younger man poured water into the glass and refastened the screw top on the bottle. He waited until the older man had taken a mouthful of coffee, then downed half of the glassful in one long draft. Blair took a polite sip, put his cup down, and waited...

Finally, the man spoke. "My name is John, Mr. Sandburg. My second name doesn't matter. You can call me Mr. John. This is my son, Johnny."

So much for his short-lived hope that his kidnap had been a case of mistaken identity. This Mr. John knew exactly who he was, and Blair guessed he was about to discover why he had been kidnapped.

He glanced at Johnny, and was greeted with a brief, hopeful smile.

"I read the excerpts from your book, Mr. Sandburg," John went on. "They... interested me."

"Did you not also see my press conference, where I explained that I made up my facts?"

"That also interested me," John said. "Why would you do that?"

"I had wanted to impress my peers; but I realized that it would be unethical to continue to do so. Two people had already been hurt because of it. In addition, Detective Ellison was beginning to find it almost impossible to do his work."

"And yet you were offered a detective's badge."

Blair kept his face expressionless with a considerable effort. He already suspected that his kidnapper was someone who worked at the PD, and he had just been given proof of that. This man knew more than he should.

"As an anthropologist I was sometimes able to offer a profiling-type comment that the detectives could use. That hadn't changed." He swallowed another mouthful of coffee.

John nodded thoughtfully. "That is a... good... cover-up," he said slowly. "However, I prefer to believe that your original document, the one you submitted to Berkshire, was indeed fact."

"I did not submit it to Berkshire!" Blair snapped. "It was a first draft that needed editing, if only to make sure that my fictional 'facts' were consistent. My mother thought she was being helpful and sent it without my knowledge to an editor friend who worked for Berkshire. Those excerpts were released prematurely and without my approval. Indeed, when the editor contacted me, I told him the document was not for publication, but he chose not to listen to me."

"Ah," John said. "Editing. Not to make sure the 'facts' were consistent but to change names, perhaps? You see, Mr. Sandburg, I know that you did not make up your facts, because I know that there are indeed people with enhanced senses." He leaned back a little, cup raised to his lips.

"There are people who have one or two senses enhanced to some degree," Blair agreed. "But all five of the major senses? It sounds impressive, and I admit that after finding Richard Burton's monograph on the subject I did become somewhat obsessed by the idea, but it doesn't really seem likely, does it?"

"And if I tell you that I know someone with all five senses enhanced?"

Despite himself, Blair stiffened slightly. To spend as long as he had looking for a sentinel... Finding Jim. Finding Alex Barnes, though she only had heightened senses, she lacked the need to protect that, in Jim, was enhanced too; and now here was someone telling him there was a third person with five enhanced senses? Three in four years?

Had he been... not surrounded, exactly, but in the presence of more sentinels than he had ever realized?

"Mr. John, a few months ago I met a woman who, it seemed, had five heightened senses. She tried to drown me. I would approach such a person with extreme caution." But he was aware of a horrified gasp from Johnny, who had been sitting so quietly he had almost forgotten the young man was there, and turned his head to look at the youngster, who had just finished his first glass of water and had paused in the act of reaching for the bottle. "You?"

Johnny glanced at his father, who nodded. "Yes, Mr. Sandburg. Johnny has heightened senses. When he was younger we consulted doctors because of certain... problems he seemed to be having. Their advice was useless. The only thing that has given me any hope was the release of those excerpts from your book."

"I would need to carry out some tests to confirm that, sir, and the strength of Johnny's senses - and if he does indeed have well-enhanced senses, he needs to find someone - we call that person a guide - to help him from being overwhelmed by them."-

"That, Mr. Sandburg, will be your job."

Blair shook his head. "I can help him, yes, but I can never be more than a band-aid for him. I already have a sentinel, and I have to admit that I'm worried about his welfare. Johnny needs to find his own guide, with whom he can form a close bond."

"Your previous sentinel is not here, and from what I was told has several friends who can help him. Johnny has nobody; he needs you."

"I hear that, sir, but a sentinel-guide bond is not something that can be forced. I can help Johnny," he repeated, "and indeed my sense of responsibility will not let me ignore his need, despite my concern for my own sentinel. I do understand your concern for Johnny, and I applaud you for it, but if you want the best for him, you must help him find his true guide from among his friends."

"I don't have any friends," Johnny whispered.

Blair looked at him, and from him to his father.

"The doctors said Johnny was autistic and should be sent to a school that specialized in the teaching of such children. I wasn't prepared to consider that, and had him home-schooled. But it meant he never had the chance to meet any other boys of his age." John sighed. "I did regret that, but it seemed better than - well, condemning him to what I believe could only have been inferior schooling."

"Siblings?" Blair asked.

"He has a sister, but her senses are normal, and her mother and I have always encouraged her to socialize with her peers. We're hoping that she'll find love with the brother of one of her friends. My wife is quite anxious to have grandchildren, and Johnny has never shown an interest in any of Jasmine's friends any time they've visited. So it seems that Jasmine will have to be the one to provide Freda with grandchildren."

It seemed to Blair that Johnny wanted to say something, but chose to remain silent. Interesting... but it did seem that Johnny deferred to his father all the time. When they first came in... Johnny didn't drink anything until his father did, and from the way he had drunk that first glassful of water, he had been thirsty. He was taking the second glassful more slowly.

"I see," Blair said. "Well, as I said, I need to test Johnny to discover the range of his senses, and I can certainly teach him a few ways to control any problems he might have - "

"The worst problem, though we don't know if it's connected, is when he sometimes seems to forget where he is - he seems to get lost in his thoughts."

"Ah - the zone-out factor. Not lost in thought, it's more that he's concentrating so hard on something that it occupies his entire attention." Blair looked directly at Johnny. "Is there one sense that you feel might be stronger than the others?"

Johnny glanced at his father, who nodded. "I can hear really well," he replied.

Blair added that exchange to the mental picture he was forming of Johnny and his relationship with his father, and not really liking the conclusion he was reaching. His first instinct, that Mr. John was more supportive of his son than William Ellison had been of Jim, was giving way to a feeling that in his own way Mr. John was as controlling a father as William had been.

Although at least he wasn't accusing Johnny of lying.

It was possible that Johnny found it easier to - well, let his father run his life, but Blair was not convinced. And he didn't much like Mr. John's comment that his wife wanted grandchildren, therefore her daughter had to get married... and he seemed quite happy to go along with that. Blair found himself suddenly wondering if the true boss of this household was Mrs. John - Freda, he remembered - and her husband and children simply found it easiest to submit to her demands.

He found himself feeling very sorry for Johnny's sister...

Meanwhile, he nodded in response to Johnny's comment. "And when you were growing up, you thought that everyone heard as well as you do?"

"Yes. But then... Sudden noises made me jump, then sometimes I seemed to lose track of time, and Mom got worried... "

"Took you to the doctor, who couldn't find anything wrong? He wouldn't, because there's nothing wrong."

"But the doctor said autistic. You know how autistic people are often thought to have certain abilities... and Johnny has always been able to identify what is wrong with a car engine just by listening to it..." his father cut in.

"The idiot-savant premise? Total nonsense!" Blair said. "Any half-way competent mechanic can do that, though someone with enhanced hearing could probably identify a developing problem before it became a problem. In any given population there's a wide range of ability in anything involving the senses. Take sight - there's blind, color blind, myopic, far-sighted who need glasses for close work, 20/20 vision and in some cases better than that. Hearing ranges from deaf, through deaf to the upper frequencies, to people - mostly younger ones - who can hear a bat squeak to perfect pitch. Beethoven went deaf but he had to have been able to 'hear' music inside his head because he carried on composing - successfully - in spite of it. Some cooks can produce new recipes just by checking the taste as they prepare a new dish. Then you get people with a sense of smell so acute they work for perfumiers, but a couple of years ago I had a student who had virtually no sense of smell at all." He could see he was beginning to lose Mr. John's attention, and smiled to himself. By now Simon would have told him 'too much information'.

"So you think Johnny could actually live a... well, normal life?"

"There's no reason why not, but first, as I said, he needs to find his true guide. I applaud your decision to home-school him, so that he wasn't exposed to the sometimes less than sympathetic treatment children who are believed to have mental problems receive; but at the same time he was denied the chance to meet other children and form friendships."

"Childhood friendships don't last," John said.

"Some don't; some do," Blair replied, guessing that none of Mr. John's had lasted. "Even friendships people form as adults don't always last. But, again, some do; and when a compatible sentinel and guide

meet, their bond is for life; only death will break it, and there's some evidence from tribal lore that if one dies the other often follows within a very few days.

"As I said, I can help Johnny, although as I said the last person with heightened senses that I tried to help attempted to drown me; only the quick action of my own sentinel saved me." He looked at Johnny for a moment. "It's made me... cautious. However, Alex Barnes was not a true sentinel; although she did have the heightened senses, she had no instinct to protect. But from what I've seen so far, I believe that Johnny is in fact a true sentinel."

"I'm sure that after you've worked with him for a while you'll find that Johnny is your sentinel, rather than the one you think is," John said. He finished his coffee and stood. "Now, I have work to do... and so do you. Johnny, I expect to see positive results very soon. Remember, I need your abilities at work."

"Yes, Dad," Johnny murmured.

"Goodbye, sir," Blair said as John turned towards the door. John made no reply, as if he felt that his last comment served as a 'goodbye'.

As the door closed behind John, Blair allowed the poor opinion he had formed of the older man to show briefly on his face, and then he turned to Johnny.

"All right, Johnny. First of all, are you drinking water because you want to, or because your father thinks you should?"

"I prefer water, sir. Anything else tastes too strong."

"Mmm. Okay, first rule - if we can call it that. My name is Blair."

"It... it wouldn't be right for me to call you that. You're my superior, my teacher... "

"Is there anyone you call by his - or her - first name?"

"Just my sister."

"Your father said he needs your abilities at work... what about the people you work with?"

"Dad only uses their second names, and says I should too. The only one he calls by his first name is his under-manager, but I have to call him Mr. Kerr."

So... in a way Mr. John was keeping his son isolated, making him keep a certain distance from the people he worked with. "What do you do?"

"Dad buys and sells cars. I listen to the engines of the ones he buys, tell him if something sounds wrong... "

"Yes, he said something about that, didn't he," Blair murmured.

"But... "

"Yes?"

"It doesn't seem like a very useful thing to do for the rest of my life." His voice was so quiet Blair could barely hear him.

Blair lowered his own voice. "Johnny, are we being watched?"

"At the moment? I don't think so. Dad'll expect a full report on what we did, what we spoke about, though."

"All right. Let's go back a step. My name is Blair, and I prefer that to 'sir' or 'Mr. Sandburg'. Especially since I don't think we're too far apart in age."

"I'm twenty-five."

"And I'm thirty. Not too far apart at all."

"Now - your strongest sense is hearing, right?"

"It seems to be."

"What's the biggest problem you have with it?"

"Everything seems so loud... and there are times I hear things I'd rather not hear. Like... "

"Yes?"

"I know it's none of my business, but... well... two of the men at work..." Johnny's face reddened a little as he spoke. "I've heard them sometimes in the restroom... It's not that they're terribly noisy, but..."

"Having sex?"

"Yes. I think they are genuinely fond of each other, and they'd like to be together, but I know that one of them is married and neither one is prepared to drop the situation on the wife."

Blair nodded. "Bad enough for her to lose her husband to another woman, but to lose him to a man..."

"Yes. It's something I'd... rather not have overheard."

"I hear that." Naomi's stock answer to indicate tolerance fell easily from his lips, especially since he could fully understand the boy's unease - yes, although he was twenty-five, Blair couldn't really help but think of him as a boy. Daryl, despite being a few years younger, was more mature. "But it wasn't deliberate on your part, so I think you can forgive yourself for it. Just let them keep their secret, okay?"

"It's got to be pretty... pretty miserable for them, though, if all they can ever have is a few stolen minutes at work with the chance of someone walking in on them."

"There isn't an easy answer, I'm afraid." But he was just a little surprised by Johnny's understanding. "I can respect them for not wanting to hurt the wife; I can feel sorry for them being caught in that situation, but there's nothing you can do. Ultimately the only people who can do anything about it is them."

"However, the problem with noises being too loud - that, we *can* do something about."

Johnny picked up the idea of the dials very quickly, although he found it much harder learning to concentrate on two different senses at the same time. Of course, it didn't help that Mr. John, rightly guessing that - given half a chance - Blair would make a run for freedom, refused to let him out of the room, refused to take the chain off his ankle. But it meant that Blair couldn't easily demonstrate how touch (for example) could help Johnny concentrate on hearing. Working in the confines of a moderately-sized room was not the same as working outdoors.

Some time into Blair's captivity, Johnny brought his sister with him to the morning lesson - Johnny still had to go to work in the afternoons.

"Hi, Blair - this is Jasmine. She was wondering about what we were doing. I told her as much as I could, but I thought you could tell her more."

Blair smiled at her. "Hello, Jasmine."

"Hello, sir."

"Didn't Johnny tell you my name is Blair?"

"But you're five years older than Johnny, so that makes you ten years older than me."

"So? I call my mother by her name, and she's more than ten years older than I am."

Jasmine stared at him, open-mouthed. "Doesn't she mind?"

Blair grinned. "Oh, I call her Mom sometimes, but she prefers Naomi. She says it makes her feel old, being called Mom."

"Oh." She glanced at her brother "Can you imagine Mom... ?"

"She'd be horrified," Johnny agreed.

Blair chuckled. "Most of Naomi's friends who have children - some don't - prefer having their children call them by name. Sometimes I think they haven't really grown up properly - they want to think of themselves as still being carefree teenagers."

"But... but..." Jasmine stammered.

"Teenagers have responsibilities too," Johnny finished for her.

"And if they have children..." Jasmine was clearly struggling to find the words to express what she was feeling.

"None of us ever felt neglected," Blair said quietly. "We knew we were loved."

"What did your Dad say about you calling your Mom by her name?" Jasmine asked.

"I never knew him," Blair said. "She told me he was killed in Vietnam before I was born. She was very... I think I'd have to say bitter about the army and the police - well, any organization that was supposed to be committed to keeping the peace, to maintaining the rule of law. She always said they were all jackbooted thugs bent on supporting the rights of the rich and ignoring the rights, wants and needs of the general public, even when she was preaching tolerance and 'love your fellow man'. Even once when we saw a guy who'd just stabbed someone being arrested, she muttered something about 'he had to have been provoked, but will the pigs listen to him? No!' Just what she thought the American army was doing in Vietnam I'll never know... I learned a more genuinely tolerant attitude when I went to University and started studying anthropology."

"So how did you end up knowing about sentinels?" Johnny asked.

"When I was growing up, Naomi took me all over the world, and I was fascinated by the different cultures I saw; that got me interested in anthropology. When I was sixteen I found a book written in the nineteenth century - The Sentinels of Paraguay - in a second hand bookshop in Santiago. The language spoken in Chile is Spanish, so a book that old written in English wasn't going to attract much attention from the locals - the owner of the bookshop had taken the view that it - and a couple of other books in English - didn't take up much space and someone might eventually buy them. I looked at it as a book that would give me the viewpoint of a nineteenth century anthropologist that I could use to compare with today's attitudes - and discovered so much more... None of today's tribes will readily admit to having a sentinel, though they might agree they had one in the past.

"You're the third one I've met, Johnny - though the second one only had the senses, so she wasn't a proper sentinel, and as I said the day we met, she tried to drown me. She knew that by killing me she would weaken Jim. But Jim arrived in time to revive me."

"What happened to her?" Jasmine asked. "Is she in prison for attempted murder?"

"She's in a mental hospital with the mind of a four-year-old," Blair said. "Long story short - she found what she thought was a way to enhance her senses even more, and overdid it; and it destroyed her mind."

"So do you think there are a lot of possible sentinels around?" Johnny asked.

"I think there could be more than we know, though the witch hunts of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries probably killed a lot of them before they could have children; but the potential had to have survived in their families. A lot of people with excellent sight and hearing have to have at least some sentinel genes; it's just that having all the senses is pretty rare. And kids that exhibit really enhanced senses... "

"Diagnosed as autistic," Johnny muttered.

"Or schizophrenic," Blair agreed. "Jim's father called him a freak, and in self-defense he suppressed his senses for years, but eventually they resurfaced. I met him by chance, and we bonded - a bond that was reinforced when he resuscitated me after I was drowned."

"You're worried about him," Jasmine said.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Isn't there anyone else who can help him?" Johnny asked.

"Yes," Blair said, "but only in much the same way that I can help you. What I said, that first day - for each sentinel there is one pretty well perfect helper, pretty well perfect guide. I'm Jim's. Somewhere there is one for you."

"But how can I meet him?" Johnny asked. "I have no friends, apart from Jasmine - and Mom expects her to get married and move into her own home - "

"And turn into a baby-making machine to give her grandchildren," Jasmine finished. "I don't want to get married. I don't want to have children. But what can I do if I don't? Mom won't let me get a job - as far as she's concerned, the only job for a woman - certainly for me - is to add to the world's overpopulation!"

"It's not much better having a job," Johnny said. "I feel there's so much I could do that would be of more value than telling Dad that *this* car sounds fine but *that* one has a timing problem developing. Okay, it's letting him know before he accepts a trade-in that it'll need work, but like you said, Blair - any of his mechanics could do the same."

"What do you think you could do, Johnny?" Blair asked.

"I don't know, because I've never had a chance to develop any interests of my own. But just listening for defects in cars seems so totally pointless... " He repeated what he had said a few days earlier. "It might be different if I ever got the chance to work on the cars, see if I could repair them."

"I never asked," Blair said slowly, "but you did say you'd zoned out a few times. Ever done it when you were actually... well, working?"

"No, but Dad is always there and keeps asking me questions about what I'm hearing, and that draws my attention away from the car... You did say that using two senses at a time would help, so I suppose taking my attention from a car to what Dad is asking counts as much the same?"

"Yes, but it's not helping you concentrate on identifying the problem you're trying to - well, identify. It's breaking your concentration."

"Using two senses at once?" Jasmine asked. "Like... would touching him help?"

"Yes. I used touch a lot with Jim."

"And if he had one of those blank spells... He's always said that when he had them it was because he was trying to hear something, so speaking to him mightn't help... would something like smelling salts work?"

"Something fairly strongly scented, certainly, though smelling salts might be a bit overwhelming." Blair licked his lips. "Jasmine - I think you're Johnny's guide. From the little we've said, you've already begun to work out strategies to help him."

Brother and sister looked at each other. Then -

"Mom wouldn't allow it, wouldn't let Dad accept it," Jasmine said.

Blair nodded to himself. He had been right - Mrs. John - Freda - was the boss in this household. "It would probably be a good idea, though, for you to work together as much as possible," he said. "That is, if you're prepared to accept being Johnny's guide."

"I'd be happy to be his guide," Jasmine said. "But Mom... "

"Not someone who'll accept what changes her plans?"

"I don't think she's even very fond of children," Johnny said. "Okay, some of it might have been that I was diagnosed autistic. It was Dad who insisted that I didn't go to a school for the mentally challenged, and for once he got his way; but she didn't ever pay that much attention to me. But Jasmine was... well, normal, and Mom didn't pay even her that much attention either until just a year or two ago. That was when she got that bee in her bonnet about grandchildren."

"Ah, but grandchildren will spend ninety-nine percent of their time with their parents, and gran only has to see them a few days of each year - times like birthdays and Christmas, when they'll be diverted by presents," Jasmine said. "It gives her boasting kudos with her friends - 'my grandson did *this*...' without the inconvenience of dealing with... oh, potty training, or a kid throwing up after eating something that disagreed with him... "

Blair looked from one to the other, aware of pity for them. His childhood mightn't have been the most stable, but he as he had told them, he had known he was loved. Had they ever felt that their mother loved them? Somehow he doubted it. Certainly they seemed very cynical about her reactions to them. Their father? Hard to say. He had cared enough about Johnny to have him home-schooled, but had he always seen his son's enhanced hearing as a tool he could use?

"Do you... " He hesitated, trying to find a way to word his question tactfully. "In the evenings... Do you spend much time with your parents?"

"No," Jasmine said.

"They don't even spend much time with each other," Johnny added. "Dad - it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say he's obsessed with cars. In the evenings, after dinner... He goes off to his workroom, and makes model cars. Working models, radio controlled. I often hear him going to bed after midnight, even when he's trying to be quiet - he doesn't usually disturb Mom, though."

"Your Mom doesn't mind him being so late, if she's already in bed?"

"They have twin beds, and she's a pretty heavy sleeper."

"Ah."

"And in the evenings, Mom watches a lot of television," Jasmine said. "She could give you the family history of every character in pretty well every soap or sitcom that's been shown in the last thirty years. But I doubt she could give you our family history."

"Apart from me being diagnosed autistic," Johnny added. "In retrospect, isn't that a situation right out of a soap? The wealthy parents with an autistic son? Whose father can use the boy's... what was it you called it? Idiot-savant ability? to help him in his work."

Blair's feeling of pity deepened.

"We didn't even really have each other until a year or so ago," Jasmine went on. "Mom kept chasing me out of the house to go and spend time with my school friends. But they were never really more than acquaintances that... I liked them well enough, but I never felt I had much in common with them. They'd be going into raptures over the latest pop singer, and I'd be thinking the guy was good-looking enough, pity someone hadn't told him his latest song was lousy and he should take a few lessons from the songs of singers like... oh, Andy Williams, back in the sixties and seventies... So I started going out, then just sneaking back home - Mom never really knew or cared when I'd come home in the days when I really did go out - "

"And I was just left to my own devices," Johnny said. "Luckily I liked reading, and I read a lot of non-fiction... Anyway, I heard Jasmine sneaking back into the house one time, thought it might be a burglar and went out to challenge him - "

"And after that we just got into the habit of spending our evenings together," Jasmine finished. "I'd always known he could hear well, but then he told me about his other senses - but until you arrived we didn't know it was possible to... well, control them."

"I imagine he told you about some of the things I've been doing with him?"

"Yes, and it all sounded so interesting - so I wanted to hear more, and we thought you'd be the best person to tell me. But now... now I've met you... The entire household knew that Dad had a prisoner here - but, well, even Anita - she's the housekeeper, the one who cleans the room and brings you your meals - she has her orders not to speak to you, and she knows that if she were to mention it to anyone she'd lose her job. But I'm wondering, is it fair of Dad to keep you here when you already have a sentinel who has to need you as much as Johnny needed someone."

"Who has the key to the shackle on my ankle?" Blair asked.

"Dad, it has to be - but where he keeps it? I don't know," Johnny said.

"And while I'm shackled here... I've never asked - where is here?"

"Tacoma," Johnny said.

"Would it be possible for either of you to contact Captain Banks, Cascade PD - Major Crime - and let him know where I am?" Although he had felt that Johnny was sympathetic, Blair hadn't been quite sure how willing he would be to - well, go against his father. But he was certain of Jasmine.

"It might take a day or two before either of us has a chance, but yes, we can try," Jasmine said. Johnny nodded.

"Thanks." He gave them the number and Johnny quietly wrote it down. "Now, Jasmine - Johnny's told you what we've been doing to help him maintain control?"

"Yes - the tests you've done, the dials, and using two senses together."

"Right. Now I'm just going to watch while you run him through some of the tests... "

When they left, just before noon, Blair had no doubt at all that Jasmine was Johnny's true guide.

For several days, Blair again supervised while Jasmine took Johnny through the tests. She was a natural, and Johnny responded to her far more easily than he had responded to Blair. They were very apologetic - neither had yet had an opportunity to phone Cascade. Evenings were easy; the problem was managing to make a call during the day when Captain Banks was most likely to be at work. And while Blair had had Simon's home number programmed into his cell phone, he didn't have that and couldn't remember the number.

After they left on the fifth day, Blair sat wondering how they could tell Mr. John. Yes, they could demonstrate how easily Johnny responded to his sister, but would he believe it wasn't something they had staged? Because he had to be aware that Johnny's sympathies were with his teacher.

Anita arrived with his lunch; he smiled and thanked her, although she never responded - of course, he now knew why.

Lunch was usually sandwiches - he had no idea why - and he nibbled one unenthusiastically, discovering that he had no appetite. He put the half-eaten sandwich down and sat meditating.

When Anita arrived an hour later to collect his dirty plates, she found him slumped over the arm of his chair, unconscious. She shook him, thinking he had possibly just fallen asleep, and when he didn't respond, she ran to tell her employer.

Next morning over breakfast, John Duncan said quietly, "Mr. Sandburg isn't here any longer."

Johnny stared at him. "What happened?"

"He collapsed yesterday, early afternoon - he had begun to eat his lunch, but hadn't eaten much, so obviously it was while he was eating. Anita found him, and called your mother. We've had him sent back to where he came from. He's no good as your guide if he's going to faint over nothing."

"Dad, he always said he wasn't my guide, and - well, we were still learning how to work together, but we all thought that Jasmine is my guide."

"Nonsense!" Freda snapped. "Jasmine's duty is to marry and provide the next generation of Duncans." She glared at her daughter. "Your father and I have given you every opportunity to find a husband - "

"Mom," Jasmine said desperately, "I don't want to get married."

"Every woman wants to get married!" Freda said firmly. "Several of your friends have very eligible brothers - "

"What I saw of most the ones old enough to marry was complete unreliability!" Jasmine exclaimed. "Not one of them would have been faithful. One did ask me out - but I knew he already had a semi-steady girlfriend, someone I knew, and no way was I cutting in on her!"

"We gave you the chance to find a husband," Freda repeated, "and you didn't, so I'll choose one for you. And if it's faithfulness you want, you'll get it. My friend Helen's son, Brian - "

"No!" Johnny's denial came a split second before Jasmine's. They knew Brian Horrocks. When he was a child he had been good company, one of the few children who hadn't made fun of Johnny's so-called autism - but an accident when he was twelve had left him seriously brain-damaged and partially paralyzed. "He doesn't understand anything since his accident!"

"He understands enough to say 'I do' and the doctors say there's no reason why he can't father healthy, even intelligent, children," Freda said. "And he'd be house-bound so there's no way he wouldn't be faithful, Jasmine, since you say that's a consideration."

"No!" Jasmine whispered. "No! I want to be Johnny's guide... "

"Sandburg was clearly a mistake," Freda said with a sideways glare at her husband. "He's put stupid ideas into both of your heads. I can see I'm going to have my work cut out to start you both thinking properly again."

"This has nothing to do with Blair!" Jasmine said desperately. "I've never wanted to get married! I don't want children! And I don't know why you want grandchildren, Mom, because you don't even like children!"

"How dare you speak to me like that!" Freda bristled.

"You never paid much attention to us when we were young," Johnny said, his voice much calmer than his sister's. "I thought, with me it was because the doctors said autistic, but Jasmine wasn't, and you pretty well ignored her, left her with Anita most of the time."

"How dare you criticize me!" Freda looked at her husband. "I blame you, John, bringing that Sandburg man here. He was clearly a very bad influence on both Johnny and Jasmine. Before they were exposed to him, they were both very well behaved."

"We were both too cowed to say what we thought," Johnny said before he could stop himself. *Yes, he thought. Blair did influence us, and from your point of view, it was indeed a bad influence...*

"Right!" Freda said. "You will remain in your room at all times except for meals, until you prove to me that you have relearned proper respect. Your father will just have to do without whatever it is you do for him. As for you - " She turned her attention to Jasmine. "You also will remain in your room except when I take you to visit Brian; he will need to get used to you, to the idea of getting married. His mother will be pleased," she added, quietly negating the one argument that Jasmine might have made - that Helen Horrocks would perhaps consider Brian too damaged to think of marriage. "John - take them to their rooms and lock them in."

"Yes, dear." He nodded towards the door, and his children turned to it, understanding that not even their father dared cross their mother when she was in this kind of mood.

It was the start of the most miserable few weeks of their lives.

Freda took Jasmine to visit Brian Horrocks every afternoon, and forced her to spend the time talking to him while she and Helen socialized. It wasn't that Jasmine disliked the boy - impossible to think of this brain-damaged young man as anything but the boy he was when he had the accident - but the idea of spending the rest of her life tied to him, having to... yes, mother him, as well as any children she might have, horrified her; and she would have to make the moves in love-making, for it was doubtful that his damaged mind would understand that intimacy.

She would, in effect, be raping a child. The idea made her feel sick.

Although he had not dared to say so, John Duncan had actually sympathized with his children and even agreed with much of what they had said.

His marriage had never been happy.

Freda had been oh, so clever, in the days when he courted her, making him believe that she loved him when, he soon realized after they were actually married, she had seen in him a meal ticket. She hadn't been snobbish enough to consider that someone who bought and sold cars was a mere tradesman, rightly seeing that the owner of a big sales garage - even when it included servicing the cars it sold - would be rich enough to give her the comfortable lifestyle she wanted.

However, the honeymoon was barely over when she began to rule his life. Although he was very successful in his business life, in his private life he had always sought to avoid conflict, and found it easier to accept his wife's decrees without argument. She had accepted that having children (but not more than two) would be unavoidable - but Jasmine had been right when she said her mother didn't like children.

She saw as little of them as possible, and when she did see them applied the rule of 'children should be seen and not heard' ruthlessly.

When the word 'autistic' had been applied to Johnny, she knew that the condition had come from her side of the family; one of her uncles had been diagnosed autistic. He had been quietly incarcerated in a mental facility when he was a child. She had only found out about him by chance, and was told that he was a disgrace to the family, never to be mentioned.

She had wanted Johnny put into care, too, but that was the one time her husband had defied her, and she had been forced to admit that it wasn't obvious that Johnny was defective. And then had come all that nonsense about 'sentinels' and bringing that... that disruptive creature Sandburg into their house in the guise of being someone who could 'help'.

What he had done was interfere with her previously effortless domination of her family.

Several weeks into his son's... yes, imprisonment, John Duncan returned home one afternoon, knowing that his wife had taken their unfortunate daughter to visit the brain-damaged young man who would be the helpless sacrifice to her obsession with having grandchildren. And like his children, John was far from sure just why Freda had that obsession...

He unlocked Johnny's bedroom door.

"Dad?"

"Hello, Johnny. I'm sorry, I've tried but I haven't been able to persuade your mother that you're sorry for - well, saying what you did."

"Thing is, Dad, I'm not sorry. It was all truth. Yes, it was exposure to Blair that gave me the courage to actually say it... but Mom's browbeaten all three of us for years, and you know it, don't you?"

Slowly, John nodded.

"And Dad - what did happen about Blair?"

"He was sent back to Cascade."

"Did you see to it?"

"No, your mother - " John broke off, a horrified expression on his face. "No - she wouldn't... She couldn't... "

Johnny licked his lips uneasily. "Dad, a day or two before he collapsed, Blair asked us - Jasmine and me - if we could contact a Captain Banks at the Cascade PD. We didn't have the chance, but maybe you...? He'd know if Blair got home safely."

"Let's see, shall we?" And John led his son to the living room and the phone there. Johnny told him the number, and he dialed.

/Cascade Police Department, Central Precinct./

"Can I speak to Captain Banks, please."

/I'm sorry, sir, Captain Banks left the PD two months ago. I can put you through to Captain Preston, who took over Major Crime after Captain Banks left./

"No, thank you. It was Captain Banks I wanted to speak to. I don't think Captain Preston would be able to help me. Can you tell me where Banks went?"

/No, I'm sorry - I don't know./

"All right - sorry to have bothered you." He hung up and looked at Johnny. "I'm beginning to get a very bad feeling here. God, all I wanted was to get you a guide - someone who knew about heightened senses and how to cope with them."

"And I'm more than grateful, Dad."

John Duncan smiled a little ruefully. "But I'm beginning to think... Johnny, I think you and I need to go to Cascade and see if we can find Mr. Sandburg."

"Dad, we have to take Jasmine too. I know that'll make it harder to get away from Mom, but we can't leave Jasmine, even if she wasn't my real guide."

"You really do think that?"

"We only had three or four days working together while Blair supervised, but I responded to her so well... Blair was quite sure she's the best guide for me. He could help me, but he already had his sentinel. And Dad... I know I help you at work, but I need to do something more... more meaningful than just listening for faults in cars. Most of your mechanics can do that. I don't say I want to be a cop or anything like that, but there has to be something Jasmine and I can do that'll help people."

"We can think about that later. Meanwhile... let's get ready to leave. Pack yourself a bag, and bring it out to the car. I'll... I'll pack some of Jasmine's things." He turned away.

Johnny quickly packed a fairly small suitcase with some clothes, glad that he had no possessions he would regret leaving behind. He went out to the car, and waited a touch nervously - would his mother arrive home while he was still out here? But no - his father joined him, carrying a suitcase, and opened the trunk of the car. They put the two cases in to join the one already there, John locked it again and they went back to the house. John carefully locked his son into his room again, then left to go back to work.

He had no fears for the continued success of the garage; his under manager was very competent, and only knew that his boss was planning on having a holiday, though not where. All he was going to do for the rest of the afternoon was make sure that all the paperwork leaving Mark Kerr in charge of the garage was legally solid, so that his wife could not interfere with Mark's running of it; he had arranged to meet his lawyer there at three.

And on the way to the garage he stopped at his bank and withdrew half of the money in his account. He then went to a rival bank and opened an account there, depositing most of the money and giving his lawyer's office as a temporary address. He would tell Frank Trent about that when they met at three.

Their evening meal was as uncomfortable as had become customary; and then Freda glared after her husband as he led his children out of the dining room, before she turned back to the table to have a final cup of coffee.

John glanced at his son as the dining room door closed behind them and nodded towards the back door; Freda might hear the front door opening, but she certainly wouldn't hear the back door, and he had left his car as close to it as he could get.

Johnny nodded and grabbed Jasmine's hand, pulling her with him as he followed their father. She went with him, not quite sure what was happening; outside, Johnny urged her into the back seat of the car and got in beside her. The moment the car door was closed, John started it, drove onto the street and - while keeping to the speed limit - drove as fast as possible away from their house.

Despite everything he had done that afternoon, all the arrangements he had made, he still did not admit, even to himself, that he had no intention of returning.

Six weeks earlier

Simon was cynically amused when, just two weeks after Banks' Investigations opened, Commissioner Norris began 'consulting' him on cases that - a few months previously - would have been given to Major Crime. He had made one comment, early on - "If we come up with evidence to solve this, how do you handle it? Won't the new Captain of Major Crime feel his nose out of joint?"

"It's possible," Norris admitted. He hesitated for a moment. "I'm about to be very indiscreet here, Simon, but I think you'll have realized the position we're in. Normally when the Captain of any department leaves, for whatever reason, either one of the senior detectives in the department is promoted or the Captain of another unit takes over. In either case, the detectives in the unit mostly remain the same. This time, however..."

"While Captain Preston ran Homicide very efficiently, the man in charge of Major Crime has to be able to look at a wider picture. Normally he'd have an experienced team working under him, and he'd pick up that wider picture from them. Any one new detective moving into the unit would be guided either by his Captain or his colleagues. But in this instance everyone in the department, even the secretary, is new to it. At the moment Major Crime is struggling."

Norris shook his head. "Seriously, I need someone I can trust to handle looking for evidence in more than one case. I can't pay you what you could call the going rate for your work, which will have to be treated as evidence from a well-placed snitch, and I wouldn't blame you if you turned the work down."

"None of this was my choice, Simon; if it had been left to me, none of this would have happened - but even someone in my position has someone senior to him pulling the strings."

"It's just a pity Sandburg didn't word that press conference of his a little differently," Simon agreed. "Calling himself a fraud, well... "

"I know he disappeared, and then three or four weeks later Ellison collapsed - what did happen, do you know?"

"We're trying to find Sandburg, but he's completely disappeared. Ellison? Never regained consciousness. His father had him put into long-term care. I go to see him at least once a week, and I know the others do too, but without Sandburg... "

"Just what was the score with those two? You never did say. Just that Ellison worked better with Sandburg around."

Simon sighed. "A sentinel needs a guide if he's to make full and efficient use of his senses. The guide helps him keep control, so that he uses his senses instead of the senses using him. I think that Ellison is pushing his hearing, at least, further and further out, trying to hear Sandburg, but there's a limit to how far even a sentinel hears."

Norris whistled softly, then frowned. "You know, I wondered why I was being pressured from higher up to - well, get rid of all the detectives in such a successful department as yours... How much of that was common knowledge inside your department?"

"None of it. I knew, Megan Connor worked it out about six months ago - she knew about sentinels from a friend in Australia. But although they might have guessed something, nobody else actually knew about Ellison. And Sandburg? It was amazing how often something he said provided a clue that helped solve a case. Not just for Ellison, but for everyone."

"The ones who came with me do know now, though. It was my secretary who wondered if someone was trying to get rid of Ellison by getting all his support out of the picture."

"I suppose that's possible," Norris said slowly, "especially if the man's ended up unconscious in a home. But I'd hate to think... "

Simon looked questioningly at him.

"All right, there's a lot of cynicism aimed at politicians, but I'd hate to think ours are as corrupt as that... "

Simon still said nothing.

Norris sighed. "My orders came from the mayor... but from the way he spoke, he had *his* orders from someone."

"And Ellison was highly successful and not a man to let the fact that someone was in a position of power influence him. If some top politician was afraid that Ellison would somehow manage to find out something that would discredit him, so acted to get rid of the threat before it materialized?"

"I'll see if I can find out anything," Norris said quietly. "And meanwhile, I'll put as much business as possible your way."

"Thanks."

Present day

"I've been thinking," John Duncan said as he drove into the outskirts of Cascade. There was a subtle difference in the way he spoke, too - as if he was suddenly seeing his children as adults rather than five-year-olds. "Someone at the police station might be able to give us some information on Captain Banks."

"Like the man who took over from him?" Johnny asked.

"No - I was thinking maybe... It's like anywhere else. You go into a police station, your first stop is a reception desk. The people manning a reception desk are usually pretty knowledgeable about what's happening, even if the people on the switchboard aren't. And Johnny - you could tell if they know something they aren't saying, couldn't you." It wasn't a question.

Johnny nodded. "I think I could."

They were approaching a motel; John turned into the parking lot, stopped, and said, "It's too late to do anything tonight. We'll get rooms here, then our first stop tomorrow will be the police station. We'll maybe find out there where Captain Banks went."

After putting their cases in their rooms, Johnny and Jasmine rejoined their father, who had begun checking his road atlas. "Town map, Cascade," he muttered, flicking through the pages. He studied the appropriate page carefully, glad of his almost photographic memory as he registered the route from where they were to the PD's central precinct. They spent the rest of the evening with John learning more about his children than he had ever known previously, and his son and daughter discovering that their father, far from being the disciplinarian they had always believed him to be, had assumed that role in an attempt to make life easier for them and for himself, in a house that was totally ruled by their domineering mother.

Their first stop in the morning was actually a diner where they had breakfast. While they were there John's cell phone rang.

"Duncan... Yes, they're with me... No, Freda, we won't be coming back. You have the house, I've left you half of the money in the bank and arranged that you'll get half of the income from the garage... If you try

to interfere with Mark Kerr and the way he runs the place, I'll sell it... No, Freda, this day has been coming for a long time. I finally had enough of your controlling ways. Your final, biggest mistake was deciding to marry Jasmine to your friend Helen's son. I'm sorry, but I couldn't let you do that... Nothing to do with Sandburg, I saw nothing of him after the first day - and did you even have him returned to Cascade? Or did you have him killed?... That's something. But now this is goodbye, Freda. Don't try to pretend you care - I was never more than a wealthy lifestyle for you, was I? Tell your friends you kicked me out, if you want; I won't be there to care. I'm making a new life for myself, Johnny and Jasmine, a long way from Tacoma. Goodbye." He rang off, and then deliberately switched the phone off.

He put it down and turned his attention back to his half-eaten meal.

Twenty minutes after they left the diner John turned his car into the PD parking garage and found visitor parking.

They took the elevator to the ground floor, and approached the desk.

The sergeant on duty smiled. "Can I help you?"

John at least recognized the question as one that receptionists everywhere were trained to use.

"I'm not sure," he said, having decided that naive ignorance was probably the best way to go. "I originally wanted to speak to Captain Banks, but when I phoned yesterday I was told that he'd left, and the girl I spoke to didn't know where he'd gone. I wondered if you had any idea? Or maybe one of the detectives in his department?"

Sergeant Fowler shook his head. "Everyone in Major Crime left at the same time as Captain Banks. Captain Preston might know - "

Preston... The girl he had spoken to had also mentioned him. The name sounded vaguely familiar.

" - but I'd doubt it. Your best bet might be Commissioner Norris." He was already reaching for a phone. "Your name, sir?"

"Oh - John Duncan."

"Fowler here, sir. There's a Mr. John Duncan here, had hoped to see Captain Banks... Yes, sir." He turned his attention back to John. "Can I ask why you wanted to see Captain Banks?"

"It's... It's about a man called Sandburg."

Fowler stared at him for a moment. "You know where Blair is?" The hopeful tone of his voice told John a great deal.

"I know where he was."

"Commissioner, he says he knows something about Sandburg... Yes, sir!" He put the phone down. "Go straight up, sir. One floor up, turn right, second door on the right."

"Thank you."

Norris was actually standing at the open door of his office when they left the elevator.

"Mr. Duncan?"

"Yes, Commissioner." He followed Norris into his office, Johnny and Jasmine close behind him.

Norris indicated seats. "You know something about Sandburg?"

John sighed, knowing that here he had to be completely truthful. "His disappearance... In a way, it was my fault."

"In a way?"

"After Berkshire began releasing excerpts from the book he'd written... and after he gave that press conference... I contacted a cousin who I thought might be able to pull strings and give me the chance to meet him. What I didn't expect... Andrew delivered him to my house as a prisoner, with a message that actually keeping him would be of more value to me than just speaking to him.

"At the time, I was... I wasn't really thinking. You see... My son, here - Johnny - has heightened senses, and I was desperate for help for him."

"So where is Sandburg now?"

"I don't know. He did help Johnny, but at the same time he asked Johnny to contact Captain Banks. But then he collapsed, unconscious. My wife... I was at work, and my wife took charge. She told me she'd returned him to Cascade. That was two months ago.

"She's always been a controlling person, and she felt that Sandburg had undermined her control of Johnny; she kept Johnny locked in his room. She kept him so secluded that even I had no access to him unless she was there too. Yesterday... Yesterday, I had a chance to speak to Johnny one on one, and something he said made me start to worry. That was also when he told me Sandburg had asked him to contact Captain Banks, only he hadn't had any opportunity to do so. I phoned, and was told Banks had left... "

"I see... Could I ask - the full name of your cousin... Andrew, you said?"

"Andrew Welsh - he's - "

"The State governor. That explains... a lot."

John snapped his fingers. "Preston!"

"What about him?"

"I knew the name was familiar. Grant Preston?"

Norris nodded.

"He's another of Andrew's cousins, on his mother's side. I'm on the father's side. I met Grant a few times when we were boys, any time my parents visited my uncle. If he works here... then... "

"He'd be in the perfect position to kidnap Sandburg," Norris murmured. "But... You said your wife had returned Sandburg to Cascade?"

"She told me she had... but I'm wondering where she returned him to."

"He certainly wasn't returned to anywhere his friends would find him," Norris said. "If he had been, Simon - Simon Banks - would have let me know. I think we need to go and see Banks."

They left John's car in visitor's parking at the PD, and drove off in Norris's car.

It was easy to see that Simon was more than a little annoyed when he heard the story behind Blair's disappearance, but he accepted that John had acted to help his son - he knew that in a similar situation, he would do whatever he felt he had to in order to help Daryl.

"We do know that Mr. Sandburg had a sentinel here in Cascade," John finished, "but I thought that because the man had friends here he'd be all right."

Simon shook his head. "It doesn't work like that."

"I realize that now," John said. "Right from the start Mr. Sandburg said he could help Johnny but he wasn't Johnny's guide, and that we'd have to find Johnny's true guide if he was to have full control over his senses."

"And then we realized that my sister is my guide," Johnny put in. "Blair was just beginning to teach her when he collapsed, and Mom said... Assuming that really was true, might she have had him dumped on the doorstep of something like a charity hospital?"

"But wouldn't he have regained consciousness and told them who he is?" Jasmine asked.

"You'd think so," John agreed.

Simon shook his head again. "Jim - Jim Ellison, Blair's sentinel - collapsed two months ago - we don't know why, but I'd guess he zoned on something. He's never come out of it. The bond between sentinel and guide is close anyway, but Ellison and Sandburg had a closer than usual bond, formed when Blair was drowned."

"Drowned?" Johnny sounded horrified. "Blair said a woman *tried* to drown him... but actually *drowned*?"

"Yes - she succeeded," Simon said quietly. "Somehow - I don't know how - Ellison managed to revive him. I was there... The EMTs said it was too late, that he'd gone, and Ellison... I thought Ellison was - well, saying goodbye... but then Sandburg started spitting up water, very much alive. After that... they'd always been close, but after that they were even closer.

"My guess is that when one of them - probably Ellison, if he'd zoned - collapsed, the other did too. And because Ellison is still not with us... Sandburg, wherever he is, is unconscious too. But I don't think Sandburg's dead, because Ellison is still alive. It's a vicious circle - we need Sandburg to pull Ellison out of the zone, but because Ellison is zoned so completely... If we actually had Sandburg, we could put them together, they'd be aware of each other, Sandburg at least would waken and they he could pull Ellison back to consciousness. But we don't have Sandburg."

Jasmine said slowly, "I know I'm very new at this, but could another guide help Mr. Ellison?"

"We don't have one," Simon said quietly.

"Yes, you do - me. I'm Johnny's guide. If he doesn't mind, I'm willing to try to help Mr. Ellison."

Johnny was already nodding. "It mightn't work, because she isn't his guide, but it wouldn't do any harm to try."

Norris left then, heading back to the PD, and Simon took everyone to Musgrove Heights in his car.

It didn't work.

Certainly Jasmine had no experience of bringing a sentinel out of a zone. In the few days since they had realized she was Johnny's guide, he hadn't zoned at all - so all she really knew was the generalization Blair had given her when he explained just what a guide did. She had been unable to use her own suggestion of something really strong-smelling because they didn't have anything suitable. Simon, who had visited most often and knew something of the layout of the place had slipped out and gone to a janitor's store, thinking that some cleaning products were quite strong smelling, but even there he had found nothing. It seemed that this care home believed in a quiet, non-stressed environment for its patients, an environment that ran no risk of stimulating possibly upsetting reactions in them.

And yet... if they never had to face anything potentially remotely upsetting - like even a nasty smell - would they ever be able to return to life outside the place? And Simon suddenly found himself wondering - why were most of the patients here?

It certainly seemed to be a place that took genuine care of those patients... but had the owners simply found in it a nice steady income? Keep everyone stress-free, then if the relatives tried to take them away they'd become highly stressed and have to come back. Simon was pretty sure that it must be costing William Ellison a considerable amount of money - which admittedly he could afford - to keep Jim here. Though if residents never left, how come there had been a place for Jim?

Simon sighed, put the surprisingly depressing thoughts out of his mind, and returned to Jim's room to report his lack of success.

"Maybe we could come again tomorrow and bring something strong-smelling with us?" Jasmine suggested.

"Or strong-tasting," Johnny added.

"Or both," Simon said slowly. "And if you need to use taste, make it strong peppermint. Sandburg sometimes had to use more than one stimulus to bring Jim out of a zone, if for any reason he'd been in one for a while."

"But wouldn't Blair notice - " Johnny asked.

"For most of their time together, Blair had teaching duties at Rainier University," Simon said.

"Occasionally - not often - when Jim was investigating something at a time when Blair was at Rainier, he would zone. I remember one time we got a phone call from a concerned member of the public who said that after Detective Ellison spoke to her concerning a break-in at a neighbor's house, he went to the house in question and began checking over the garden. The caller said that she hadn't paid much attention, but suddenly noticed that the detective seemed to be frozen on the spot, and he'd been standing there for at least an hour, since she last registered what he was doing.

"I went along." He gave a wry grin. "My usual method of dealing with a zone - if I had to - was slap or punch him. It didn't work. We got hold of Blair, and it took him nearly another half hour to pull Jim back to what you might call reality. Blair decided Jim had zoned on sight, so he tried talking to him, rubbing his arm - the two things he normally found most effective - and finally had to resort to what he called 'the big guns' - slipped something tasting very strongly of peppermint into Jim's mouth. It worked in seconds. Turned out that while he doesn't mind a slight minty flavor, Jim detests strong peppermint, and Blair knew that. That was his fall-back, last resort stimulus."

"So under the circumstances, it might be an idea to use that first?" Jasmine suggested.

"We could," Simon agreed, "but if we do - you slip it into his mouth, then stand well back really fast, talking to him. Doesn't matter what you say. Just repeating 'Jim, Jim, Jim,' would probably be enough. If he hears a female voice he might not lash out the way he would with an unfamiliar male voice."

"Lash out?" Johnny sounded worried. "Should I do it rather than Jasmine?"

"It's... well, it's his army training," Simon explained. "If he's wakened suddenly he's liable to assume there's a threat and he lashes out defensively. Even being wakened by a really nasty taste... He would assume it was some sort of threat. Not even Blair was safe. If he does hit someone under those circumstances, he'll be really apologetic, but the person he hit still has a black eye." He looked down at his friend. "We'll be back soon, Jim," he murmured, and turned to leave.

Back in Simon's car, Johnny said, "It's maybe a long shot, but Mom said... Cascade *is* big enough that there is at least one charity hospital here? Could we check it to see if they had someone dumped on their doorstep two months ago? And if he is there, could we bring him here and put the two of them together?"

"Yes," Simon said. "Though if he isn't there, I've no idea where we could look." He turned on the ignition and drove smoothly away from Musgrove Heights and back towards Cascade.

The road was quiet, and Simon covered the twenty-odd miles between it and Cascade at a steady 60mph. He pulled in to a filling station some five miles outside Cascade, filled the gas tank and bought sandwiches for them all, then drove on; they ate as they went. Once inside Cascade he dropped to a law-abiding 30mph, and - partly because the roads were busier and he hit red lights several times - it took him as long to reach Cascade Community Care from the city boundary as it had done to cover the distance from Musgrove.

He pulled into the small and almost deserted parking lot at CCC roughly an hour after leaving the larger - and busier - one at Musgrove.

The small group made its way to the main door, with Simon, at least, comparing the dismally depressing appearance of the place with the luxurious-looking decor of Musgrove. Here there was no money for anything more than basic cleanliness; at Musgrove money was no object.

Inside, the reception desk was very small. The girl manning it looked very young, and Simon suspected that she was a volunteer, possibly a psychiatric or medical student looking for work experience.

"Can I help you?"

Simon flashed his PI authorization. "We're following up a possible lead on a missing person. We just heard that he was dumped on the doorstep of a charity hospital in Cascade approximately two months ago. At the time, he was unconscious." He opened his wallet and took out a small photo. "This man." Though he knew the animated look on Blair's face would be nothing like the blank one on the face of an unconscious Blair.

She looked at the photo, then pressed a buzzer.

/Yes, Peggy?/ The voice from the speaker was slightly distorted. This was far from being a state-of-the-art communications system.

"There's someone here looking for a man who could be the John Doe we found lying at the door two months ago."

/I'll be straight down./

Peggy looked at Simon, "Dr. Pollock will see you in a minute."

"Thank you."

In fact, Pollock arrived in less than the minute she had specified. He crossed straight to the visitors. "Dr. Pollock," he introduced himself.

Once again showed his PI authorization. "Banks, of Banks Investigations," he said. "And this is Mr. Duncan and his children, Johnny and Jasmine."

"If you'll come with me?" As he turned to lead them away from reception, he threw over his shoulder, "Thanks, Peggy."

Jasmine echoed Pollock. "Thank you." She smiled at the girl before turning to follow the others.

Pollock led them to an office - a small office, and with five of them in it, it was somewhat crowded. There was only one visitor's chair, and Simon unhesitatingly indicated that John should take it.

"Can you give me some details about the man you're looking for?"

Simon handed over the photo. Pollock looked at it and frowned slightly before returning his attention to Simon.

"Who is he?" But there was a slightly suspicious note in Pollock's voice.

"He was a police observer who was kidnapped some three months ago," Simon said.

"I thought our John Doe looked familiar," Pollock said, "but I couldn't place him. Now I see this photo... Wasn't he on TV around three months ago, saying he'd made up evidence of something?"

"It's a long story," Simon said. "But the important thing - he is here?"

"Yes. He was unconscious when he was found; he's still unconscious."

"Can we see him?" Johnny asked.

Pollock looked at him, clearly wondering why this young man should interrupt the older PI. Johnny grinned weakly. "I'm... the reason he was kidnapped."

"Doctor, we think we can help him," Jasmine said.

Pollock returned his attention to Simon, who gave a weak smile. "I said it was a long story," he murmured.

"And not an entirely creditable one," John admitted.

"You weren't the original criminal, Mr. Duncan," Simon said quietly. "The thing is, Doctor, Sandburg's mother thought she was being helpful when she sent the first draft of his doctoral thesis to an editor friend. What she didn't realize was that the editor would be so impressed that he'd put the thing right to the front of the line for publication, as it stood, although when he contacted Sandburg about it Sandburg told him it wasn't for publication. But he didn't pay any attention, began releasing excerpts to the Press; in turn that drew their attention to the man Sandburg called a sentinel, and to let Jim do his job properly and stop a contract killer, Sandburg held that press conference and denounced his own work."

"Meanwhile," John Duncan cut in smoothly, "I'd seen those releases, and it explained a lot about my son, about things he could do. I made the mistake of mentioning this to a cousin. He contacted another cousin who was in a position to kidnap Sandburg, and delivered him to me. And yes, I did hold him prisoner; I was desperate for help for Johnny, and he *was* helping. But then he collapsed, unconscious, and my wife had him returned to Cascade. It was only a couple of days ago that I discovered what her idea of 'returning' him was. I suppose he was lucky that she dumped him here, rather than just somewhere on the street."

"Just before he collapsed, he had asked me to try to contact Mr. Banks," Johnny said, "but I didn't get a chance... but then I told Dad, and he tried to contact Mr Banks, and - well - here we are."

"So can we see Sandburg?" Simon finished.

Pollock had been looking from one to the other as they spoke; now he nodded. "Yes, but there doesn't seem to be any way to bring him out of his coma."

"We've got an idea about that," Jasmine said.

"And even if our first idea doesn't work, we have a back-up plan," John said.

Pollock took them to a room where its unconscious occupant was hooked up to a drip.

"God, Blair!" Simon whispered. He bent over his unconscious friend.

Johnny and Jasmine headed for the bed; John touched Pollock's shoulder and nodded towards the corridor. Pollock followed him back out.

"Whatever happens, we'll be taking him away with us," John said quietly. "Now, because a lot of this is my fault, I'm taking responsibility for him. I know it's cost quite a bit caring for him for the past two months - "

"The use of a bed, some medical care - not as much as the big hospitals would have you think," Pollock said.

"But it's obvious that he's had good care," John replied. "Obvious that he's not been neglected in any way."

"I wouldn't allow any patient to be neglected."

"I see that. So as a measure of my appreciation - " He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out his check book and a pen. He leaned on a window sill. "Now... to Cascade Community Care..." He wrote the name firmly, added an amount, dated and signed it, tore the check out of the book and handed it to Pollock. "I hope that covers two months' care?"

Pollock looked at the amount on the check. "Five hundred thousand..." he whispered, and looked up. "You... Thank you."

Inside the room, Jasmine had taken possession of one of Blair's hands.

"Wake up, Blair. Wake up. Jim needs you..." She had decided to treat her fellow guide in much the same way as he had taught her would work on her sentinel. Johnny took the other hand, careful not to disturb the needle feeding the drip into Blair's arm. Simon stood watching them, desperately hoping...

John joined him. "Anything?" he murmured.

"Not yet."

"If necessary we can take him to Musgrove. I've got the money to cover the fees for him there."

"Once they're together I'd doubt they'd stay unconscious for long," Simon said.

"But they won't let Sandburg stay at all unless we pay," John pointed out. He sighed. "I just wish..."

Simon just looked at him, and waited.

"In a lot of ways, Sandburg was the best thing that ever happened to me, to my family," John said. "He gave us - the three of us - the courage to stop letting my wife rule our lives. But when he collapsed, I was at work and I didn't query her when she said she'd returned him to Cascade. But I should have; I knew she didn't like him, knew she thought he was a bad influence..."

There was movement from the bed. Jasmine's voice took on a new note of urgency. "Come on, Blair! Come back - Jim really, really needs you..."

"Wha..."

"Jim needs you, Blair. He's zoned and nobody but you can bring him back."

"Wha... Where..." Blair blinked, trying to focus. "Jasmine?"

"Yes. Blair, Jim's badly zoned. He needs you."

"Jasmine, your father - "

"Mr. Sandburg, I'm sorry," John said. "You're back in Cascade, and I've accepted that Jasmine is Johnny's guide."

"We'll explain later," Simon said. "For the moment... Can you stay awake? Because Jim..."

"How bad?" Blair asked.

"It's been two months," Simon said quietly. "As far as we can make out, you collapsed unconscious at about the same time he zoned."

"Two... Simon, where is he? In another room here?"

"No - his father got him into a care home. He's been well looked after, but we didn't know where you were - "

"Mr. Sandburg, when you collapsed, my wife had you sent back to Cascade, to a charity hospital. It took us until now to find you." John's voice held guilt and apology. "I understand from Johnny that you had begun to teach Jasmine what she needed to know as his guide - and it paid off. She couldn't reach Mr. Ellison, but she did reach you."

Blair tried to get out of bed, and fell back. "Damn, I'm weaker than a kitten!" he muttered. He looked helplessly at Simon. "Can you get me out of here, get me to Jim?"

"I've already told the doctor here that we'll be taking you with us," John said, "and given him some money to cover your expenses here - no," he added, holding up his hand. "All this was my fault, my responsibility... but even without that, you did help Johnny, and found his guide. I owe you for that."

"How soon can we leave here?" Blair asked.

"How are you feeling?" Nobody had noticed Johnny slipping away to fetch Dr. Pollack, and none of them had any idea how long Pollack had been standing beside the door, Johnny beside him.

Blair looked at him. "Weak, but lying in a bed for two months will leave someone pretty weak," he said. "But if someone helps me, I should be able to walk out of here."

"All right. Let me give you a quick check first. I'd be happier if we could monitor you for a day or two, but I do understand you'll want to get back to your normal life as quickly as possible - and from what I've seen, your friends here will certainly keep an eye on you." Pollack's instincts as a doctor were warring with the determination of his patient to go home, and the wish of his patient's friends to get him home - or, rather, to the 'Jim' he had mentioned. There were undercurrents here that he didn't completely understand - he was quite sure that he had only been given part of the story behind his patient's condition - but he firmly suppressed his curiosity.

After checking Blair's blood pressure, pulse, etc, he stood back. "All right, I'll let you go, but take things easy... and at the first sign of any difficulty, go to your own doctor."

"Thanks," Blair murmured. "Er - where are my clothes?"

"Here." Pollack indicated a small cabinet beside the bed, pulled a clean but slightly ragged curtain round the bed, and left. John grabbed his children and moved to outside the curtain, leaving Simon with Blair.

Simon retrieved the clothes. T-shirt, sweater and... kilt?

Blair looked at the kilt. "It'll do to get me out of here," he said, "but I think our first stop has to be the loft - I suppose my clothes are still there?"

"Yes," Simon said.

He helped Blair dress, then supported him as he made his unsteady way round the end of the curtain to rejoin the others.

After a quick visit to the loft, where Blair shed the kilt and thankfully pulled on a pair of jeans, Simon said, "It's really too late to do anything more today. Yes, Sandburg, I know you want to see Jim as soon as possible, but another night won't make much difference."

He took the Duncans back to their motel and arranged to pick them up the next morning, then took Blair home with him, and spent a while satisfying Blair's curiosity over what had been happening in Cascade

during the previous three months. However, despite having spent two months unconscious, Blair tired surprisingly quickly, and after eating a bowl of soup he went to bed, leaving Simon thinking over the events of the day.

At nine the next morning Simon (and Blair) went back to the motel and picked up the Duncans, and headed back to Musgrove Heights. "They'll be surprised to see us back so soon," Simon muttered, "because I don't usually visit every day, and I suppose they'll end up contacting Jim's father... but the sooner we get Blair and Jim back together again, the better."

"How supportive is Mr. Ellison's father?" John asked.

"He was in denial about Jim's senses for years," Blair said. "He thought that if it became known, people would call Jim a freak. But he did love Jim - he just didn't know how to show it. In a way, he still doesn't... but he does want what's best for Jim."

"Hence the care home," Simon finished. "Without it... If Jim had just been left in Cascade General... They do know him there and he wouldn't have been neglected, but I'm not sure he would have survived these two months. At Musgrove there's very little external stimulus; at Cascade General there's a lot and I suspect Jim would have gone deeper and deeper into the zone to escape it."

Blair nodded. "You could be right," he said. "A sentinel zones when he's concentrating too much on one sense, but he can also be caught unaware by something unexpected. And even if he was already in a zone, it's possible he could be driven deeper into it." He was half aware that his words were directed more at Johnny and Jasmine - and possibly their father - than Simon.

"There are a lot of disadvantages to being a sentinel, then?" John asked.

"That's why the guide is important. Even though I understand that they didn't at one time see much of each other, the fact that Jasmine is Johnny's guide would have helped him even though neither of them knew what they were," Blair said. He was silent for a moment, then went on. "When a sibling is the guide, the relationship is a little different from when there's no blood tie. For example, when we get to Jim... I'll really need to climb into bed with him to make contact, let him feel that I'm with him. Jasmine will never have to climb into bed with Johnny. Their shared genealogy gives them more awareness that the other is there. It's not totally automatic - Jasmine will certainly have to talk Johnny through certain things - but not as often as I need to do with Jim. And in another way... Johnny doesn't have the 'depending on others is weak' mindset that Jim's father drummed into him when he was a child."

"On the other hand, we both had 'Mom knows best' drummed into us," Johnny murmured. "Anyone older automatically knew more than we did, and it wasn't polite to argue or put forward an opinion of our own."

"We both did mentally rebel, but it wasn't until we met you that we had the courage to tell her what we really thought," Jasmine added.

"And she ruled me, too," John said. "She was a far more dominant character than I ever was. Well, the three of us are here now, and want to make a new life for ourselves."

Blair said slowly, "Cascade is Jim's territory. He mightn't react well to having another sentinel here."

"What makes you think that?" Jasmine asked.

"I told you... Some months ago another sentinel turned up in Cascade. Jim reacted very badly. She wanted me to be her guide... and when she realized I was totally committed to Jim... "

"But Johnny has a guide. Me. He doesn't need you," Jasmine said.

"That might make a difference. But if there's a problem... Don't get me wrong, I know you both need a lot of help still and I'd be happy to help you, but my main responsibility is Jim, and if he does react badly - " He looked at John. "If he does, you'll need to get Johnny out of Cascade. It would probably be all right to keep in touch by letter or email or even phone, but you'd have to leave Cascade."

"I understand," John replied.

"Let's just see how things work out," Simon said as he turned into Musgrove's parking lot.

The receptionist looked slightly startled when the group - this time consisting of five people rather than four - entered, with the fifth man, who looked somewhat unsteady on his feet, being assisted by Simon Banks.

"Mr. Banks?" she asked.

"We'd like to see Jim again, please."

"His brother is with him at the moment."

"That's all right," Blair said. "I know Stephen quite well. I don't think he'll be too worried about our visit."

She frowned slightly. She knew Simon well; but he had already arrived the previous day with three strangers and now here was a fourth stranger, one who hadn't visited before yet claimed to know their patient's brother. Blair smiled at her, although smiling was the last thing he felt like doing. "If it would make you happier, go and ask Stephen if he objects to Blair visiting."

She nodded and headed for the corridor leading into the building. They watched her walking briskly along it, then after an almost perfunctory knock, entering the room that Simon knew very well, and closing the door quietly behind her.

They heard the yell - "Blair!" Then, slightly quieter, "He's here?" before the door flew open, and Stephen rushed down the corridor, almost knocking the group down in his haste. "Blair! At last! Where have you been?"

"Long story, Stephen, but the nearest we can figure is that when Jim zoned out I lost consciousness, and I've been lying unconscious in Cascade Community Care with nobody knowing I was there. Simon found me fairly late yesterday. Jasmine here is a guide and she managed to pull me back to consciousness; now I need to see Jim."

"Damned right you need to see Jim! Do you think... How quickly will you be able to pull him back?" Stephen asked.

"I don't know; a zone as serious as he's suffered... I might need to stay over tonight and I don't think the staff here will be happy about that."

"I'll authorize it - "

"And I'll pay," John said. He gave a wry grin. "They won't turn down a week's fee for what might only be one night."

Stephen glanced at him. "Sorry? You are... ?"

"John Duncan, from Tacoma. I'm part of the long story."

"Okay. Well, come on!" Stephen turned to the corridor, and saw the receptionist standing there looking far from happy. "It's all right, June," he went on. "But there is just one thing - Blair might be staying with Jim overnight."

"What? Mr. Ellison, I can't authorize that!"

"How much?" John asked.

"What - ?"

"Of course we'll pay for the privilege of having Mr. Sandburg staying tonight."

"And if you want your patient to recover, believe me when I say that Blair is the best medicine he could receive," Stephen went on. "And excellent as this place is, if I tell my father that you seem more interested in getting money for keeping Jim here than actually helping him to recover so that he can leave, he will transfer Jim to somewhere else." He turned to re-enter the room.

As June moved back to Reception, they all crowded into Jim's room.

Jim was lying on his back, his face totally blank. Blair pulled away from Simon's support in his haste to get to his sentinel, and almost fell; only Stephen's quick grab kept Blair on his feet.

Blair remained motionless, leaning against Stephen, for about five seconds, then said, "I need to get into bed with him." He began to pull off his sweater and shirt.

Once he was stripped to the waist, he moved forward. Stephen helped him onto the bed. Once he was sitting on it he toed off his shoes, then lay down, reaching for Jim.

Stephen and Simon helped him turn Jim onto his side and Simon settled Jim's head on Blair's chest. Blair adjusted his position a little, then lay still. "Okay, tough guy," he murmured. "You don't have to strain to hear me now." Remembering his responsibility as Johnny's teacher, he looked over at the young sentinel. "He uses my heartbeat to keep himself centered," he explained. "You might find yourself using Jasmine's; or you might find it more useful to use... oh, her scent."

"I don't think I've ever really been aware of anyone's heartbeat," Johnny said.

"Background noise," Blair agreed, then turned his attention back to Jim, stroking his sentinel's head gently.

Jasmine watched carefully. She fully understood that she would have to develop her own strategies for helping Johnny, but there was no harm in knowing what Blair did to help his sentinel.

And then, almost before anyone expected a response, Jim murmured, very softly, "Blair... "

"Yes, Jim. I'm here."

"Where were you?"

"Tacoma."

"Ta- How?"

"You remember that day at the PD?"

"You left to go home... "

"Someone grabbed me in the garage, knocked me out - when I came round I was in Tacoma."

"Oh." And then Jim stiffened. "Blair? There's another sentinel here."

"Yes, but he isn't a threat."

Jim took a deep breath and went on in a more relaxed voice. "There's a guide... "

"Yes. They helped to bring me here."

"Good people, then... Blair, where is here?"

"Musgrove Heights, bro," Stephen said.

"You've been zoned out for weeks," Blair murmured.

"Dad had you brought here - they've been looking after you very well, but of course Blair was the only person who could help you. Simon's been looking for him all this time - "

"But until the Duncans arrived all we could find was a big fat nothing," Simon finished.

Jim was silent for a moment. "We're not cops now, are we?"

"I've set up a PI business, and Commissioner Norris is actually putting some work our way," Simon told him. "And once you're out of here, there's a place in it for you and Blair."

The door opened again and William Ellison entered, a doctor close behind him.

"Hi, Dad," Stephen said. "Jim's awake."

William looked towards the bed, and smiled. The doctor looked too, and gasped in horror. "You can't... can't... You can't have two men in one bed!"

"Blair is on the bed, not in it, and it worked!" Stephen said.

"Blair," William said. "Where have you been all this time?" But he sounded anxious rather than accusing.

"I was kidnapped and taken to Tacoma."

"Wha- Why?"

Blair glanced at the doctor - a man he instinctively found himself trusting less than the friendly Dr. Pollack. They had unhesitatingly told Pollack about the sentinel thing - Blair didn't feel he could trust this man with that same knowledge. "Long story," he said. "You know - " He glanced at William - "I think Jim would recover better back at the loft - "

"Young man," the doctor said sharply, "Mr. Ellison is my patient, and he has been unconscious for two months. I would be failing in my duty if I allowed him to leave before his current state of health has been thoroughly checked. And we still don't know why he was unconscious. There is no guarantee that he won't lose consciousness again ten minutes from now! He has to stay for at least another week, possibly two, while we run tests!"

"No, he doesn't," William said. "I didn't mind how much it cost while he remained unconscious, but now... Yes, I grant you he'll be weak from lying in bed all that time, but why do I think you're simply trying to screw some more money out of me? His stay here is paid until the end of the month - that's three days from now. Beyond those three days means more money - which I don't grudge if the stay is needed; but I don't think it's needed."

"I'd rather get home," Jim said softly.

William nodded. "I'm signing Jim out now," he said.

The doctor made one last effort. "Mr. Ellison, he can't possibly stay on his own - not after the length of time he's been just lying there unconscious!"

"He wouldn't be on his own; he and Blair are housemates. But to simplify things he - and Blair - can stay with me for a few days; my housekeeper will be happy to pamper them both."

The doctor gave up. "All right. Do you have suitable transport for him?"

"Yes," William said.

Musgrove did provide a wheelchair to take Jim to the front door, once he - with Stephen's help - was dressed. The doctor lost some points with William, however, when he made no attempt to provide a wheelchair for Blair, who was very obviously needing Simon's help to walk the short distance to the door.

The group gathered beside William's car as first Jim, then Blair, was eased into the back seat. William looked around at everyone, then directed his attention to John Duncan, ignoring the two youngest people there. "Where do you fit into this... " He waved a hand that encompassed the whole group.

"I think we need a little privacy before you hear the entire story," John said.

"Understood. Did you get a cab here, or - ?"

"He came with me," Simon said.

"All right. If everyone will follow me home, I do want to hear this story." He got into the driver's seat, waiting till everyone else was in a car, and set off.

It was very late morning when they reached William's house; but even faced with a party of eight, rather than just William, it didn't take Sally long to serve a satisfying meal.

After they ate, they told William the full story. He was far from happy about it, although he could understand John's motive.

"Is there anything we can do about Captain Preston?" Stephen asked.

"I'd doubt it," John said. "Although I knew that Andrew had been the one to arrange for Sandburg to be kidnapped and brought to Tacoma, Andrew will be very careful not to know who delivered Sandburg to my doorstep. I'll be the one left carrying the responsibility."

"We're not charging you with anything," Blair said quietly. "You acted to help Johnny, and you certainly didn't ask anyone to kidnap me. And when it came down to it, you helped us."

"Governor Welsh also had to be the one applying pressure to get everyone in Major Crime fired so that Preston could take over with a squad of his choice," Simon said. "And I understand he and his squad are not doing well - Commissioner Norris has asked me to find evidence in several cases that would normally be handled by Major Crime."

William looked thoughtful. "I wonder... "

"Yes?" Simon asked.

"Welsh still has a year of his current term to run, doesn't he? Then he has to stand for re-election... "

"Yes, and he will stand," John said. "He always had the need to be top dog... I never really enjoyed it when my parents visited his."

"I think I can do something to make sure he isn't re-elected," William said.

"But a year from now won't help Mr. Banks - or anyone else who was fired from Major Crime - get back their jobs."

Simon grinned. "We have Commissioner Norris's backing, and frankly? Now that Jim and Blair can join us - you will, won't you?" Both nodded. "I'm happy to continue with Banks' Investigations."

"But what do you mean to do, sir?" Blair asked John.

"I was thinking that I might start a new garage here in Cascade. I've left a manager in charge in the Tacoma one, and I have an income from it but that's shared with my wife; a totally new garage, not a subsidiary of the other one, would be mine alone."

"Or you could set up a model car business," Johnny suggested. "That would certainly be totally separate and even if she found out about it Mom couldn't claim that there was any connection at all with the Tacoma garage. You could sell things you make online as well as having a small shop."

A slow smile dawned. "Johnny, that's brilliant! It wouldn't make as much as a garage, but I don't need it to. But what would you and Jasmine do?"

Johnny glanced at Jim. "We still have a lot to learn from Blair, if Mr. Ellison doesn't mind - "

"Jim," Jim said. "And no, I don't mind. You don't set my nerves jangling the way Alex Barnes did when she came to Cascade. Whether it's because you already have a guide, I don't know. But whatever we can do to help you, we will."

"I don't know what I want to do," Johnny went on, "but I think I have to do something where my senses will help people."

"Well, there's time to consider that once you get a bit more training," Blair said, "but I know that Cascade Forest's Ranger service is always looking for good men - and women - and search and rescue comes under their remit; amazing how often people out hiking get lost." He had a feeling that John Duncan would be happier with that than if his daughter - in particular - ended up in police work or fire-fighting.

"Now," William went on, "I think that Jim and Blair have done enough for the moment. I'm not chasing everyone else away, but I think they need the chance to relax in peace."

"Expect Joel, H, Rafe and Rhonda to visit," Simon said, "but I'll ask them to hold off till tomorrow."

"They can come tonight," Jim said. "If Blair and I have the afternoon to relax, we'll be happy to see them - and you, too - tonight. You can bring us up to date with what you've all been doing."

After Blair had arranged to see Johnny and Jasmine the following morning, he and Jim said their goodbyes and made their unsteady way to Jim's childhood bedroom. When they reached it, they found it now held a second bed - Sally had been busy. They glanced at each other, then Jim quietly led his guide to the bed that obviously 'belonged' to the room. It was big enough for them both, and after kicking his shoes off Jim lay on it, pulling Blair down too. Blair toed his shoes off and settled Jim's head against his chest, in a position very similar to the one that had pulled Jim out of his zone.

"Johnny's a good kid," he murmured, "but you're my sentinel, Jim. Only you."

"They do seem like good people," Jim agreed. "But the sooner the kids go to work for the Forest Rangers, the happier I'll be."

"They mightn't end up there," Blair said, "but it was offering them a possibility. But although I never actually met her, I think it's good for all three to get away from Mrs. Duncan."

"I wish we could do something about Preston."

"Unfortunately I didn't see who grabbed me in the garage," Blair said, "though I'd guess it was him. But a year from now - if your Dad is right about being able to keep Welsh out of office - Preston won't have an influential cousin keeping him in a job he's not really suited for."

"He was a good Homicide Captain," Jim admitted.

"Doesn't automatically make him a good Captain in any other department. Now Simon seems happy enough as a PI... I don't suppose he'd want to go back... "

"We could extend his business to cover security systems too," Jim said slowly. "Check out business premises, see where they could do with increased security - you and I could handle that side of it... "

"Banks' Security and Investigations. Lots of scope," Blair said happily.

"Yes," Jim agreed. "Lots and lots of scope." He pressed his ear a little harder to Blair's chest. "It's good... being together again."

"Together," Blair agreed. "Always."