Law enforcement would be a lot more fun without all the darn crime.

First Annual Dorset County Folk Music Festival

by Dasha

So disclaimed.

Humble thank you to Martha and Kitty, who not only betaed this, but also finally made me understand about skin. (Really, I had no excuse for not getting it before.) I owe them big. I'd make them homemade soap, but my homemade soap isn't exactly a prize, so I'll have to think of something else.

The order for this series is, Iceberg, I Still Believe, Pilgrimage, and then this one. But since I didn't write them in that order, you aren't obliged to read them that way. Please send any feedback to dasha_mte@yahoo.com

This story is a sequel to: Pilgrimage

August, 2007

The meeting room on the second floor of the library is not properly air conditioned. I'm sweating, and I really hope Jim is going to consider it one of the yummy-smelling sweats. He's going to be pretty ripe himself tonight. We've been here for two hours already, and the meeting is only beginning
to wind down as the chair turns it over to Geneva, the head of the parade committee. "Last night the committee decided on the lineup. If you'll look at the last page, we've got the final parade route. Marty is in charge of getting everybody organized at the high school parking lot. He'll have the list and he'll start the first car at exactly 9:30 on Saturday morning."

Across the table Marty, the Jailer, nods and scribbles a note in the margin of his map.

To my surprise, it is Miss Lillian who speaks up and unkindly draws out the meeting just a little more. "I am a bit concerned. This parade route is almost four miles long. We've got our marching band, the marching band from Chelan and the VFW... I just think that's awfully far to make them walk."

Geneva Miles, the head of the winegrowers association and the chair of parade committee, scowls. The winegrowers wanted a wine festival, with the focus of the activities in Bickford. They lost to the folk festival contingent. Everything but the parade will take place downtown in Ithaca or out at the fairgrounds. "Mrs. Billings, you're the last person I'd expect to be partisan. This parade -"

Miss Lillian, one of the most mellow people I know, stiffens in her chair and slowly, slowly turns toward Ms. Miles. "Don't make this about partisanship, Geneva. This is about walking teenagers in wool uniforms for four miles."

"The Parade Committee -"

"Hey, whoa, wait," I say quickly. "Look, you can line up the bands in the Bickford Elementary parking lot, and feed them in as the parade goes by. Nobody is going to see the parade as it goes down Wenatchee Road anyway."

"That would cut two miles off," Miss Lillian conceded.

"There is no --" Jim's phone rings before Ms. Miles can finish, and I miss what she says next as I try to listen in on Jim. The call is short and he stands up at the end of it.

"I'm sorry, folks, but we've had a police matter come up. Now." He picks up his hat and pauses. "This is not a partisan comment: I need the final parade route. I needed it three months ago, and I will have it on my desk at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow or there will be no parade because there will be no parade security." He smiles, nods pleasantly, and motions me to follow him out.

"That was a little harsh," I say as we head for the stairwell.

"Chief, I am so sick of this festival and it hasn't even started yet. I don't understand how you've been going to two of these meetings a month for the last year. Personally, I would have had them all stuffed and mounted by now."

"Ooooh. Well, that explains that little demonstration of how to win friends and influence people. No, I mean what's up?" I nudge him in the region of his phone.

"Two high school students just found a body in the graveyard on the hill above the gymnasium. It's, um... apparently been there for a while."

"Oh." A body. An old body. Lovely. "I don't suppose it was a body that was supposed to be in a graveyard?"

For that I get a dirty look.

"Do we have any outstanding missing persons?"
"Only if Ham O'Neil didn't really run off to Flagstaff with his wife's hairdresser in June."

Can I feel myself turning green? Fresh bodies are bad enough. I shudder, realizing that I haven't puked at a crime scene in over a year and a half.

When we pull into the gym parking lot, there is already a Dorset County Sheriff's Department sedan waiting. Dave Couch, one of our deputies, is standing with the principal and two teenagers at the foot of the hill across from the building. As we come up, Dave smiles briefly before putting on his professional face. "This is Ali and Douglas. They found the . . . body. It's human, all right, sir," he adds to Jim. "I took a quick look. I have never, in my life, seen anything like it."

Oh. Lovely.

The kids, upperclassmen probably, but looking way too young for this, are clinging to each other's hands despite the scowl their principal is casting in their direction. Jim tries to slouch, so he doesn't look quite so imposing, and asks them what happened.

The boy, Douglas, draws the girl closer to him and answers, "Band practice let out early and some of us, well, Ali and me, we went up to the graveyard." He nods toward the hill rising behind us.

The principal, Mr. Walters, grunts. "During the school year, I have to go up every morning and make sure nobody's snuck up there smoking and skipping school." He gives the kids a dirty look.

"Anyways . . ." Douglas glances at Mr. Walters, "There's a cave up there, behind the graveyard. Nobody goes in there much, it's pretty wet. Especially this year, with all the rain we had in the spring. It practically had a creek running out of it. But this month," another glance at the principal, "Well, it's been pretty hot lately. I thought maybe . . . So Ali and I went up in there, and we . . ."

Ali, apparently, can't take drawing out the story any further, any more than Douglas can bear to get it out. "It's all over the floor of the cave. There was plenty of light. We could see it just fine. But it took a moment - to realize what - it was."

Jim nods encouragingly, but neither of them volunteers any more. "Did you recognize who it was?"

Their jaws drop and they shake their heads wildly. That bad. This gets better and better. Jim motions the principal aside. "Paul, as a favor to me, I'd appreciate it if you didn't discipline these two."

Walters grunts. He's a big man who never smiles unless the basketball team is on a winning streak. "Consistency is worth something, Jimmy. I have to worry about discipline."

"And they came and got you anyway. Paul, when something serious goes down, they can't be so afraid of you that they don't talk to me."

Walters chews on that, then steps back and raises his voice a little. "They did do the right thing by coming to tell me. I suppose a body is more important than the school rules."

Jim sighs. "After finding that, I'm not sure what you could do to them that would even make an impression."

"You're right about that. Thank God school hasn't started yet, or I'd spend all day tomorrow with students bouncing off the ceiling. I don't suppose there's any way to avoid making a huge scandal out of this?"

Jim glances up the hill. "Let's see how bad it is first. It isn't necessarily a murder."
Dave follows his gaze up the hill and smiles at me slightly. He is trying to be professional, but I can tell he's excited. "Joey is up there now securing the scene. I can show you the way if you want, Sheriff?"

"We'll find it, thanks," Jim says a little stiffly. "Make sure you have everyone's statement." He grunts at me to follow him and starts up the narrow path that cuts into the hill. Really, it's just a scramble-way for kids looking to cut school, steep enough that we have to bend forward as we climb. Jim's butt is even with my eyes. A pretty sight, but moving stiffly enough to make me think Jim's unhappy about something. Not that I'd blame him. We haven't had a murder in a long time, and the last time we had a crime without an immediate and obvious suspect was the clown who robbed the mayor's poker game. An unidentifiable body? We got one or two a year in Cascade, but this is ... different.

"Jim?" I ask, watching where I put my feet, "You ok?"

"I didn't say anything to Dave Couch, Sandburg, so don't start." It was the tone of voice I was expecting, but not the denial.

I glance behind me, but of course we're alone. "Say anything to Dave about what?"

A sigh. Like he's humoring me. "About him practically drooling over you."

Oh. This again. Well, it's been a couple of months. I guess we're about due. "Jim, man, that is really flattering, but he wasn't coming on to me. And anyway, he's just a kid."

"Let's not have this discussion now, all right?"

"Fine," I say, very careful not to sound sharp. I'm not going to come down on him. I'm not. He's doing his best here, and he's doing ok. Really. We've been working on this for a while, and we've got a ways to go. This kind of thing takes time, and it hasn't even been a year. We only started last ... October? Yes, October. That was when Jim got sick.

Which, yes, makes my blood go cold to think about. Jim getting sick. But it wasn't anything serious, just a little virus. Not even very scary at the time. By lunchtime he was quiet and sneezing and letting me drive. Used to be, when he got a bug, he'd complain and grouse at the same time he was denying anything was wrong, but not any more. He goes still, like he's hoarding even that little bit of energy. When we got home that night, I gave him soup and toast and vitamins and settled him on the couch to watch TV. I pressed my lips to his temple to test his temperature. Hot. My stomach clinched, but if I smelled alarmed he was too stuffy to tell it. "I'm gonna call Lynn and see if she can squeeze us in tomorrow."

"It's no big deal, Chief. I'll take tomorrow off. In a couple of days I'll be fine."

"In a couple of days you'll be coughing up green," I rubbed my thumb over his forehead, and he leaned into my hand, silently asking me to hit his pressure points. I worked on his sinuses for a few minutes and went to call the nurse practitioner. She keeps her home number unlisted, but a few of her patients have it.

"She'll squeeze us in at quarter to eight in the morning, before her first regular appointment," I announced as I came back to Jim.

He looked up at me sourly. "Well, isn't that a surprise. Aren't we lucky she likes you?"

"What do you mean? It isn't me -- you're her patient."

He snorted and turned away.
I looked at him carefully, wondering how much of this was resentfulness about being sick at all and how much might be something else. "Jim? Is there some reason you'd rather not go see Lynn?" Even though she had never treated him without me present, the idea that she had somehow hurt him made it very hard to keep my voice even. Surely not. Surely I would know.

"No, why wouldn't I love watching you two flirt all over each other?"

I'd thought Jim being sick was scary. "Jim . . ." Because I was badly thrown and desperate I reached for the first thing that came to mind. "Lynn is married. She has two children."

A flinch, but no answer. I had no idea what he was thinking, let alone what to do about it. Oh. When bereft, go for honesty. "Jim, it's really irritating when you won't tell me what planet you're on. Why do you think Lynn and I are -- what? giving each other the eye? Planning to run off to Reno?"

His eyes flashed hurt before they darted away. Frightened, I crouched before him, putting myself in his intimate space, almost touching. "Jim? Do you think I've been with anyone -- anyone -- else since I've been with you? Has there been anybody? Is there any way to keep you from knowing if there were?"

He shook his head, reluctantly.

"And there's no way to lie to you either, is there? Not when we're like this. I promised you forever, Jim. Was I ever lying to you when I promised you forever?"

His eyes slid shut and he wouldn't look at me.

"Jim, I'm not going anywhere. Forever. As long as you want me."

Still no answer.

"Jim, we were together for years when I was . . .dating," but backing off was wrong. I couldn't afford euphemisms. "When I had lovers. I always came home to you. Always. I was never . . .there was never a chance that I wouldn't come home to you. Ever. And we weren't even together then. If there was nobody in the world who was a threat to your place in my life then, there sure isn't now!"

"You don't understand."

"No, Jim, I don't. I'm with you. I'm only going to be with you."

No answer.

"Explain it to me. Make me understand. Why are you acting like Lynn is competition?"

"To you it's no big deal. Just a purely instinctual reaction to body chemistry. S-sex isn't about intimacy, it's just about a healthy expression of our biology. So there's no reason why you shouldn't want Lynn, no reason not to do anything about it. And -- God, if you did, Chief -- I know it wouldn't mean anything -- but I couldn't -- I couldn't -- "

I could see that. Even thinking about it was chewing him up. Damn. I took his face in my hands. "It's ok. It's ok."

"I'm sorry. It's how you are, and I love you, and I know you're being so rational and healthy about all this . . . God, if this is just some territorial sentinel bullshit -- "

I was kneeling between his legs by then, nearly as close to him as I could get and still see his face.
"Easy, Jim. It's ok. It's ok." I took a deep breath. "Jim, did you think I didn't notice that you were monogamous? I knew what I was getting into when we started this five months ago, and I was fine with it. Delighted." I smiled. "You. Me. Forever. I can do that."

But he was so sad.

"You think I can't do it. You think I have no control at all." It was kind of insulting. "Kind of" only because I knew he was in such a bad way. Sick enough to finally crumble against doubts that must have been eating at him for months. I slid my arms around him. "Jim, I have never wanted anybody, ever, as much as I wanted you. Not in my whole life. And in all those years, I never touched you. Not until you asked me to. Did I? If I can resist you for years, I can resist anybody. I am Mister Control. The living embodiment of continence. Monks bow when I enter the room. If I'm not going to risk messing up what we had to be indiscreet with you, I'm not going to do it for anybody."

He thought about that, then asked softly, "Yeah?"

"There were days when I was sure my balls were going to explode any minute and I'd exsanguinate right there in the kitchen."

"Oh. Wow."

"Yeah. You're more important to me than anything. Ok? I can't promise I won't ever notice anybody else. But there is a long way between noticing and wanting to do anything about it, let alone choosing to do anything about it. I choose you. That is the best I can do."

"Oh. Ok."

"Jim? I never noticed Lynn. We're never with her unless something is happening with you, and you pretty much take up the whole world for me when you're sick."

"Yeah."

"I'm pretty sure she hasn't been looking at me that way. Her brain is mostly occupied with trying to puzzle out your medical history. Enough to keep noticing either one of us to a passing thought, if it happens at all. No matter what you saw or thought you smelled."

"I'm sorry. I knew I was being crazy. I just -- "

"I know. I know."

We went to bed early, but Jim didn't get a lot of sleep; his throat was burning by then and the fever wouldn't stay down. The next morning I took him to the hospital's outpatient clinic. Lynn gave him a quick once-over, grilled him in minute detail about how he'd been since she'd last seen him in July, and prescribed antibiotics. I kept Jim between the nurse and myself, and sent him every reassuring signal I could. To my immense relief, Jim got better instead of worse and things got back to normal.

Of course, that was the night Jim missed the mayor of Bickford's last poker game. But that's another story. This story ends with Jim getting all tense and possessive every four or five months. The important part is Jim is good about telling me when he's feeling insecure, and good about listening when I tell him he has nothing to worry about.

But it's best that we don't drag this up at work, he's right about that. So I keep my mind on the case, looking up as the path opens out onto a bench in the hillside. This must be the graveyard. It is much cooler than I'd expected. The dozen or so gravestones are all very old, sandstone instead of marble. I glance at the nearest one as we pass it, but the inscription is worn away to unreadable. Yes, very
cool, but we don't have time to go sightseeing now.

The "cave" is a wide crack in the exposed rock. The ground around the mouth is runneled from where water had been streaming out, but now it's dry. Joey Fanzelli pokes his head out of the dark slit. "Hey, Sheriff! You have got to see this! It's incredible."

"The . . . corpse?" Jim actually seems a little thrown. You don't normally hear crime scenes described as 'incredible.'

"Oh -- no way, Sheriff! This isn't a body! It's a find! An Indian site or something. I've never seen anything like it."

Jim glances at me and then squeezes into the cave after Fanzelli. He has to duck and inhale at the same time to make it. I follow, only having to take off my hat. The inside of the cave is small, but not too small for all of us. We squeeze onto a narrow stone ledge to the left of the opening. For a second, all I see is shadowed cave floor, a jumble of earth and small stones.

Then, all at once, there it is. "It" is spread out before us amid the small rocks and silt and blown leaves.

I don't know what I was expecting. Wet bodies I had seen puddled in a ditch or, once, the trunk of a long-submerged car. The jellied mess of Jean Duval, dropped out of an airplane during flight. Or that dismemberment case back in '03. I could go on.

It was, indeed, 'all over the floor of the cave.' But not a wet, smelly mess. Dry, brown bones, scattered atop the mud and small rocks. Half-buried, some of them. My flashlight (when did I get it out?) adds to the light from the door. I trace it over the larger bones, tumbled in the far corner. Smaller ones toward the opening. Automatically, I count femurs. One. Two. Just one body then.

"Well? Chief?"

I blink. "Well, what?"

"What do you think?"

I look at the skull, facing us on its side. "It's human."

"I can see that. Is it Indian? Is this some kind of . . . archaeological find? Or is this a murder scene?"

"Well, hell, Jim. I don't know. You can't -- you can't just tell that by looking. I mean, if there were any trace of clothing, or, or tools . . ."

Fanzelli traces his light up the wall above the dark bones. A darkness, just below the ceiling, just at Jim's shoulder height. "I couldn't get close. I couldn't without stepping on . . . something. But, you can see where it's still a little wet. I think the water must have washed them out of that hole during this last year."

"We aren't prepared for this," Jim says, and we're not. If the evidence can't be gathered with a fingerprint kit, a polymer cast, or one of those little vacuums, then we might as well forget it. "I wonder if Bobbi over in dispatch would know who to call. Or Sherry at the office? We can ask the state for a forensics team. Chief? Do we need to contact a university? The state antiquities office? The BIA? Damn."

I look at the scattered bones. Mottled. Polished almost. Standing out easily from the ground now that I know what to look for. Like Johansson finding Lucy; suddenly there were bones everywhere. A
couple of feet in front of me is a toe bone. Shorter, flatter than a finger bone, but very like all the same. It sticks up out of the damp earth, deeply familiar, and yet weirdly out of place.

"Chief?" I recognize Jim's 'are you going to throw up?' voice.

"I don't know. I was never on this side of it before."

"I guess I'll call the state and report it," Jim says, sighing, "but I think what we really want is an archaeologist?" He glances at me, and I nod, automatically. Damn. The site is going to have to be guarded until someone can get in to excavate it, and we are going to be hard put to spare the staff right now.

Jim ducks and turns sideways to ease back out the opening to use his cell phone. I aim my flashlight at the ground, sliding along the slanting stone floor along the wall, toward the pile of bones in the corner. I crouch, leaning over the damp dirt to get a closer look at the skull. Obligingly, Fanzelli leans down and aims his light at the remains.

I stare at the skull, dark and mottled, not shiny and white like the articulated skeletons they keep in science class rooms. What takes my breath away is how familiar it is. How deeply, weirdly, familiar. I mean, most of the corpses I see are, well, corpses. Dead bodies, not just naked bones. They have faces. They show signs of violence, usually, and they smell of something besides mud. Even the older ones, runny and unrecognizable and smelling like a moat excavation, have never been as bare, as old as this.

How ironic. The most trivial part of the life I left behind, turning up here, looking exactly the same. But no, really, I had never wanted to be an archaeologist. You have to learn the principles of archaeology and human evolution, but as interesting and important as all that is, as much as I had to keep my eye out for anything sentinel related... it was never the sort of thing that could become my life's work, not really. Spending every summer in a tiny tent with giant spiders and no hot showers and fighting people you have grown to loathe for the last teaspoon of peanut butter... ok, that actually sounded like fun. The possibility of pulling mysterious treasures out of the mud and getting to know people who had been dead for millennia was intoxicating. But spending one or ten or twenty years digging square pits in ten centimeter increments (stopping to draw and photograph the hole) and maybe finding nothing ever or unearthing the find of a career the first week and then spending your life trying to top it... and after all that, no matter what you found, never, ever being able to ask the actual people if your theories were any good, if you'd understood anything at all...

Yet, weirdly, here it is again.

My senior year I'd worked briefly in a natural history museum. My job had mainly been cataloging a new collection of small stone tools (yes, rock chips). But at the end of my time there, there had been a big scandal. The museum wanted to re-inter a collection of about three dozen partial native skeletons which had been a gift from a private donor during the 1960's and hadn't been touched since being put in the warehouse across town. The museum didn't have its own expert in bio-archaeology and hadn't been able to borrow one from Rainier, so they brought in some recently retired bigwig from Kentucky on a six week grant to label and measure the collection before turning it over to the tribal government for the reservation closest to where they had been found. Where the museum had thought they were found. It turned out things were more complicated than anyone thought. I was helping carry boxes into the tiny lab at the back of the museum when Dr. Moore opened the first one and started laying out the yellow-brown bones in a long tray. When I got back from the second trip, he was diving into the boxes one after another, pausing briefly to hold the skulls upside down and then moving on. He took the box I was carrying out of my hands and set it on the table, popped the tape with his pocket knife, and rooted lightly in the crumbling excelsior until he produced a large jaw
fragment which he held out to the museum's director, a short, elderly marine biologist who hovered, scowling, at his shoulder. Dr. Moore angled the yellow teeth into the light and ran a finger lightly over the smooth, dimpled surface. "I don't know who these people were, Rita, but they weren't Northwest Coast Indians. Look at this tooth wear. These people were eating stone ground grain."

I never knew how the story ended or who the people in the mislabeled boxes really were. The following week the grant the museum had been using to pay me ran out. About that time my anthro major and my psych minor were starting to dovetail into an interest in sense perception and the possibility of the existence of actual sentinels. I was dating Shaleen about then. So I'd put the bones and stones pretty much behind me except for scanning for archeological evidence for sentinels or being drafted by faculty needing short term help now and then.

Except here I am, looking at another smooth, dark skull, another set of teeth. I swear, I can still remember the names of the skull bones we had to memorize for Human Origins, still remember how teeth would look when they've chewed a lifetime of gritty maize.

I stretch out one gloved finger. After so long in the wet the bones may be soft, so my pinky is as light as air as it caresses the tiny notch I have been staring at for two or three minutes now. The glove catches just slightly at the rough spot on that front tooth. Just slightly. On the rough spot Dr. Watson said would be there when she was teaching Human Origins and trying to make it 'relevant' for the bored kids who were there for the general credit.

I stand up and motion for Fanzelli to follow me out. Ducking back into the bright sunshine and cool breeze, I catch Jim's eye. "I'll call you right back," he says, hitting end and turning to me. "What, Chief?"

I step closer to him, lowering my voice even though Fanzelli is the only one around and he might as well hear it too. "It's probably not more than fifty or sixty years old, Jim. It's a criminal investigation."

"What do you mean? I thought you said with bones you couldn't really tell the age by looking?"

I reach to point, but catch myself and remove the glove from my right hand before I tap one of my front teeth. "She has a chip, right here."

"She? What do you mean, a chip? A computer chip?"

"Women used to hold their hair in place with one hand and open the hairpin on their teeth with the other, like this," my hands hover over my head in the approximate position. "They would wear a groove or a little chip right here."

He blinks at me. "How do you know this?"

I shrug, suddenly uncomfortable. "It's intro stuff. First year archaeology."

"Oh." Jim looks back at the cave for a moment. "It couldn't be . . .something else?"

"It could be. I've never seen it, only heard it described. But it is enough that we have to treat this like a murder."

The disappointment only flickers for a moment. He was really hoping it wasn't a murder. Or at least not one in our jurisdiction. A murder from the last ice age would have been fine. I wait while he gives the bad news to the state, tells Fanzelli to tape off the front of the cave, and gives the place a last look around. We leave Deputy Fanzelli to finish his shift guarding the cave and head for the path out.
"Everything ok?" I ask in the tone of voice that means, "How's your blood pressure?"

For just a moment his face softens. "Just fine." But then he looks back at the cave.

"You know," I say, "it can't be less than two or three years old. Not and be that clean. It's probably a lot older. You couldn't have done anything. You weren't here then."

He grunts at me and starts down the hill.

While he makes dinner, I call Robyn Hurley, the chair of the music committee, and catch her up on this afternoon's meeting. Robyn is the Methodist minister's wife. Jim and I met her last year when we were visiting churches. I like Robyn a lot, mostly because she let me (the correspondence secretary of the music committee) unofficially make most of the decisions about which musicians to invite to the folk festival. She also makes really good brownies and she has brought new depths to my understanding of large-scale, coordinated hospitality: where the musicians will sleep, how to get them fed (no, they can't fend for themselves among the vendors and eat hot dogs), how to make sure they have water while performing and a place to sit down and relax just before and afterwards.

After dinner, I do the dishes and Jim makes several more calls to the state. No, Lorain and Billy Joe are not up to doing the forensics on a case like this themselves. Two workshops in Seattle don't prepare someone to deal with something this unusual, and they don't even have the equipment. No, Chelan doesn't have anybody better we could borrow.

But half the state ME's office is at a conference in San Francisco and the forensics division attached to the State Police can't get anybody here sooner than Thursday morning, a good thirty-six hours more. They won't give this one a priority because (to quote Jim between phone calls), "the damn thing may have been there a hundred years already, and it can keep another day!" While dialing he calls them officious bastards, and I slip him some antacid.

Forty-five minutes later, Jim gives up on getting anything sooner than day after tomorrow and heads out to take a walk. He walks three or four nights a week, sometimes with me, usually alone. I don't call it "communing with the territory" out loud.

God, I love him. I really do. But how am I going to cope with this jealousy bullshit?

At that, I go get in the shower. Even with Jim half a mile from the house, if I'm going to get mad, I am going to need some camouflage.

I might be going to get mad. Even though I know it has nothing to do with me. Even though I know -- I know -- he is doing his best.

It just feels so shitty! Like I've done something wrong, like I'm making him feel this way. I haven't done anything. I haven't let myself admire anyone for over a year now, I feel guilty if I notice that the woman in line ahead of me at the store has really nice hair -- and -- and -- Dave? Dave is a kid! Does Jim think I have no standards? Does he think I'll sleep with anything?

What do I have to do to make him trust me? What is it going to take?

But no, that's wrong. This has nothing to do with anything I've done, and even nothing to do with what Jim thinks of me. If I start feeling threatened, or guilty and angry, and start justifying me to myself and getting defensive . . . I won't be reacting to the reality of Jim any more than his jealousy is reacting to the reality of me.

What Jim is feeling isn't about me.
It is about Jim being betrayed by everybody who should have been on his side starting with every member of his natal family except for Sally and continuing through one of his superiors in army intelligence, several of his brothers among the Cascade Police Department (including internal affairs, whose job it is to keep the police force clean), and a long string of women that, ironically, both begins and ends with Veronica Archer.

If that wasn't enough, he is territorial as hell, and interacts with his territory in ways people who aren't sentinels can't really imagine.

I wonder, briefly, if sentinels are 'naturally' monogamous. Odd if true. Very few animals are. But perhaps it wouldn't matter if he had one spouse or five, as long as the lines were very clear about who was 'his' and who wasn't.

Which makes me smile, fleetingly, at the thought of being part of Jim's harem. Could I share him? I was prepared to more than once. Veronica Archer, for example, gave me a pretty good scare. What did I care who else was in his life, as long as I wasn't pushed out? Which, actually, is what scared me about Archer. She didn't strike me as the kind of woman who would put up with Jim keeping a live-in graduate student as a pet.

All right, yes, it was hard, having him want them in ways he didn't want me, looking at them the way I wanted to be looked at. But I could have sucked it up and stood it, if it meant I got to keep on being his friend.

I turn off the shower calmer than when I got in, but no closer to an answer. I have won, after all. Jim loves me. That was the hard part, right? After that, everything has to be downhill. Right?

I'm reading when he comes to bed an hour later, clean and slightly damp from his own shower. We wash a lot: the price, like my short, tidy beard, of living with a sentinel.

"You mad?"

"About Dave? No."

"Am I right?" He slides in between the sheets beside me. I put the book aside.

"About Dave? I don't know. He doesn't set off my gaydar. But he might see something in me he wants. You know? Not sex, but something."

"I'm sorry. I know how you feel about this possessive shit. I know I don't own you. I wouldn't... stop you if you wanted to leave."

I am not sure that last part is strictly true, but he wants it to be, so I leave it alone. Instead, I say, "How I feel about anybody else has nothing to do with how I feel about you. Or whether or not I would ever leave you. I wouldn't."

He inches closer, resting his forehead against my upper arm. I sit up, and he stiffens as I pull away, but I just remove the t-shirt I have on and slide back down beside him, turning so I can take him in my arms. "I always came home to you. It never occurred to me... I never wanted to do anything else."

His hand silencing across my chest is soft, almost timid. I move closer to him. He's afraid I'm mad, but I won't push him away. Never. Affection isn't some kind of reward I'd take away because Jim doesn't always feel exactly the way I want him to feel about things. At times like this, I wonder about Carolyn. But I don't go there, because the next thoughts will have to do with Jim's parents... No.
Instead, I lean forward, nuzzling his neck, breathing in his smell. I taste him and pet him until he begins to relax under my hands, till he feels it from my body that I love him.

The next morning we swing by the high school before going in to the department. At the base of the hill, the editor of the local paper is waving a camera and arguing with Elliot Shoemacher.

Well, arguing is perhaps the wrong word. He is keeping a smile on his face and his voice even because Doris is sitting at Deputy Shoemacher's left foot coyly showing her sharp front teeth in a way that says, 'think about the fact that I'm cross-trained as an attack dog before you stand quite so close to my handler.'

Elliot actually looks a little uncomfortable until he glances over and sees us coming. He smiles at Jim and takes a step back, one hand resting on Doris's head. "I was just explaining to Mr. Randall that crime scenes are closed to the press."

Jim isn't fond of reporters much. He looks at Randall's big, old-fashioned camera like it might bite. "I'm sure Mr. Randall already knows that." Jim looms really well. Like a professional. If he left law enforcement, he could pick up steady work as a bouncer and probably never even have to touch anybody.

"Look," I say quickly, "you'll get a statement as soon as we have one. We know this is a big deal. As the local guys you'll get first shot. But you know we can't let you near the cave until state forensics has cleared it."

"But you will confirm that you have a dismembered murder victim up there."

Jim rumbles like a mountain getting ready to go volcanic. I step all the way between him and the hapless editor and snort. "Yeah. Right. All we can confirm we've got is an unidentified, mostly complete skeleton. Of unknown age. We can't even say officially that it doesn't predate our jurisdiction." Then I relent. "I'm sorry. I know you normally go to press today. But you can't print what we really don't know."

"The state," Jim says suddenly, "won't send us a forensics team till tomorrow morning. We won't know anything till then, and even then not much."

"Why won't they send you a team?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask them."

As Randall walks away, I notice that Jim is smiling. "Wow," I say. "That was clever. And mean."

"Oh, come on. If State can't handle a little guy like that they deserve to suffer." He shrugs and turns to Elliot. "So? How was last night?"

"Quiet. Millie was on with me last night. She brought folding chairs, a little cooler of soda and some homemade pie. Lorain just relieved her, she's up there now." He glances at his watch. "Dave is supposed to relieve me--he'll be here any minute now."

Jim looks at Doris, leaning against Elliot's leg. "Um, did -? I mean, she didn't -"

"What?"

"Well, it is a cave full of bones." Jim glances worriedly at the Shepherd mix and back up at the hill.
"Jim, Doris is a professional. You know that. She would never interfere with a crime scene."

Jim winces. "I know. I know. Just... keep an eye on her, ok? If something were to happen, I'd hate for her to get blamed."

Dave Couch turns into the lot then, and I wince inwardly. But Jim, like Doris, is a professional. He is the same calm, polite, model superior to Dave that he is to everyone else under him.

Satisfied that everything is fine out here, we head back to the department.

The mayor of Bickford, the mayor of Ithaca, two county commissioners, and the festival coordinator are all standing out in front of the courthouse as we drive past. Jim curses and pretends not to see them.

"What?"

"This is going to push the damn festival right off the front page! Something this unusual will probably even get picked up in Seattle and Cascade. Which would be bad enough if it were an archaeological find, but it's going to be a scandal. Some kind of local embarrassment - No! don't look at them. Just go in to work like any other day. Good, nod at me; we're not ignoring them, we are just too busy talking to notice."

"I don't think they see us."

"Don't look. If anybody says anything, we play it down, we don't know anything yet, and we're just following procedure."

"Yes, Jim. I have been in law enforcement for a while now."

"Right. Sorry."

As per his demand, the parade route was waiting for Jim when we arrived. He retreats into his office to work out deployment and coordinate by phone with the police chief from Bickford. Bickford currently only has three cops, but the parade is going through their town, so I hope he's being polite.

After a few minutes, he pops his head out the door. "When did I agree to let Elliot and Doris drive one of my county cars full of varsity cheerleaders throwing candy in the parade?"

"The Rotary Club fish fry. Geneva suggested it and Commissioner Chang was standing right there and thought it sounded like a wonderful idea."

"Oh. Right." He disappears again through the door.

I check my email. Twenty messages, more than half of them to do with the festival. I can see why Jim is in a hurry to see it over.

"Blair? I've lost all the reports from last month." Sherry, the office manager, is speaking in this little tiny whisper. Her eyes, peeking over the top of her screen, are narrow and hard. She hates the computer, and anger is fighting with embarrassment. She looks back at the screen. "Oh, God. I've lost everything from last month."

We spend half an hour looking for the files before I give up and head for the "A" back-ups in the basement ("B" back-ups are in the courthouse, "C" backups are at the police station in Bickford, in return for our keeping theirs). It takes a few minutes to find the right ones. Back upstairs, though, reloading them goes pretty quickly. As we're finishing, the door to Jim's office opens and Miss
Lillian comes out. Jim walks her to the door, and he seems pleasant enough, but he's... stiff.

"What's up?" I ask very casually.

"She stopped by to drop off the latest vendor list. In case we needed it."

"Oh."

"Then she asked about the woman's body we have behind the high school."

"Oh." That didn't sound much like Miss Lillian -- to capitalize on her friendship with the sheriff to get some juicy gossip about the latest scandal.

"She knows something, Chief."

"Huh -- what?"

"She stood there and asked me about it, smelling all guilty and afraid."

I blink, trying to get my balance.

Jim turns away, whispering bitterly, "My problem is I'm just never paranoid enough."

We spend the rest of the morning going over old records, looking for missing persons, although, of course, the skeleton may not be local. Both the night shift desk sergeant and Sherry have already checked the records, which only go back to 1926. Five missing kids, the most recent ten years ago. An elderly man who disappeared from his home in 1956. Two nineteen-year-old males who disappeared in 1963. A married couple who went for a picnic in the woods in 1974 and never came back to their car. That's it. Everyone else who disappeared, turned up later one way or another.

I coax Jim into going out to lunch with me at Mom's down the street. The food is boring, but good. Several people ask us about the mystery behind the gym. All they get is dark looks from my partner, and I try to distract him as soon as we sit down. "Do you mind if I'm out tonight after work? Robyn just got the programs back from the copy shop in Chelan and nothing has been collated or stapled. She's asked a bunch of us over to help get them ready."

"Sure, fine. I wanted to mow the lawn anyway." He frowns at his meatloaf. "The yard's a mess. Maybe - "

"No. Don't even start. I don't care what the lawn looks like, I don't care if it is one giant dandelion. You are not putting chemical shit on the lawn."

"I'm just saying --"

"I can't believe you're even suggesting this."

He shrugs. "Well, it looks untidy."

"Oddly enough, I like having you healthy. I've gotten used to it. No fertilizer. No weed killer."

"Ok, ok."

"Ok."

"So we have tomorrow off. Was there anything you want to do? We could head into Chelan, do some shopping, maybe pick up some fish?"
"Gee, I don't know how much time we'll have. The state people are coming in the morning and we don't have any idea how long it's going to take them to get it all cleared out." I am acutely aware that at the mention of tomorrow my heart has sped up. All I can do is hope he doesn't notice. I get really, really angry (again) that I let myself get talked into this little 'surprise.' I mean, what was I using for a brain when I thought deceiving Jim for *fun* sounded like a good idea? Like it's some kind of game or something, lying to him. Like any reason for it is 'good' enough. Because he can't help but notice that something about me is 'off,' and he's got enough to worry about without false alarms from me.

He's been lied to enough when it was the real thing.

"So, um, I guess this whole . . . cave thing . . . must have you pretty excited." Which shows he noticed my agitation. Even if he is guessing wrong about the reason.

"Well, it's the biggest case we've had in a while."

"Must be bringing up some stuff."

"Oh. Well. I guess. It's... weird, more than anything else."

"Weird?" He is watching me patiently.

"It was another life."

"It was your life."

"It was... just knowledge. I never even thought I'd need it outside of a classroom. I never expected it... Here it is, in the middle of this life. I feel more bewildered than anything else."

"Do you miss it, that other life?"

"You're kidding, right? You know I'm happy."

He looks into my eyes. "I know."

In public, in uniform, I cannot tell Jim I love him. I don't have to, though. He smiles for a second before stirring himself. "So about what time do you think you'll be home?"

"It shouldn't be too late. There'll be several of us there working."

It is past 11:30, though, when I finally get in. I head straight for the bedroom, pausing only to put up my gun and stop by the bathroom. The lights are out, but Jim is still awake when I come in unbuttoning my shirt. "It's late."

"Some of us got to talking over coffee afterward. Did you know the Hurleys have been missionaries in four countries?"

"I thought missionaries were the enemy, Chief."

"Well. Yeah." I pause, leaning down to untie my boots. "But what am I going to say about that? Everything they did was with the best intentions and was the best they were able to do. Just because I disagree with some of the outcomes... What am I going to say?" I shove the shoes under the bed.

"Blair... you really need to take a shower."

"It's so late, I thought..." I stop. He's facing away from me. I go around the bed and squat facing him. "Jim? What are you smelling?"
"Robyn Hurley."

I keep my voice level. "Can you smell her husband, Jim? He was there the whole time. Can you smell her teen-age kids? I think I have some dog fur on my pants: can you smell Blackie?"

"Blair, I'm sorry. But. You really need to shower."

"Ok. Ok."

The dirty clothes go in the hamper in the bathroom, which is where they should go anyway. I wash and quietly come back and get into bed. Jim is facing away from me, but turns onto his back as I slide in beside him. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"Jim... is there anything I can do differently? Anything that would make this better."

"No. It isn't you. I know it isn't you." He laughs then, which startles me. "I know that Sunday school teacher is not trying to seduce you." He turns toward me, propping himself up on one elbow. "Oh, God, Blair. I don't know what I'm going to do!"

"You love me, right?"

He drops his head. "Oh, yes!"

"Then it's gonna be ok." I coax him into my arms, breath with him until he falls asleep. I stay awake long after, though, turning possibilities over in my mind. I will have to look at my notes. How often does this happen? Is there some kind of seasonal cycle to Jim's possessiveness? Could it be dietary? I don't really need that kind of explanation, not with our culture and his history being what they are. No wonder he's insecure about us.

He gets up before me on Thursday and makes breakfast. Pancakes and ostrich sausage. When we head out we take separate cars because I have to drop a box of the finished programs off at the chamber of commerce and Jim has a meeting with the commissioners about the mess behind the high school gym. We aren't expecting the crime scene team until nine o'clock or even later.

After dropping off the programs I still have some time, so I stop by the office just to make sure the network hasn't lost all the files from last month again. As I walk in though, I see Jim through his open office door. He's at his desk, talking on the phone.

For a moment, I am actually so angry I am struck silent and immobile. Then I storm in, slamming the door so hard that the walls shake. Quickly, Jim rings off and looks up at me anxiously. "What?"

"Jim, why don't we ever work on the second Thursday of the month?"

"Blair, come on. I haven't even been here twenty minutes -- "

"Because the pest control people come on the evening of the second Wednesday of the month."

"I just stopped in -- "

"Do you know how they invented bug spray, Jim?"

"The technology has come a long way since then -- "
"It's a byproduct of defense technology. It's an outgrowth of research on nerve gas for use on humans."

"It's perfectly safe."

"Nerve gas, Jim. Let's think about that, shall we?"

"Blair --"

"Do you remember the incident at Joel's with the hornet spray?"

"This is a different --"

"Do we really want to find out what this garbage does to sentin --"

But Jim is moving now. At last. Silently, I follow him out to the sidewalk. I am relaxed. I am calm. I am not going to kill him. "What is it with you lately?" That was yelling. Which is not only unnecessary, but really, really inappropriate; when we're on duty he is my boss. But dammit! Last month I caught him picking out weed killer for the lawn.

"It wasn't a big deal. I just went in for a few minutes. Come on, Chief. You're right. I shouldn't have done it. But it's not the end of the world."

Before we can pursue it a white van pulls up in the "no parking" spots along the front of the court house. An ugly, boxy van -- which means it is our forensics team.

First, there are pictures. We've already taken pictures. The state takes more. Then the head of the team, a middle-aged Asian woman in spotless coveralls, drops a plastic plank onto the cave floor and carries in a couple large lights. Her assistants, a junior tech and some kind of intern (my God, they're so young!) hover anxiously at the entrance, just in front of the deputies who had been on guard. Then more pictures. Then they start passing in padded, plastic crates. I watch it all from just outside the mouth of the cave, turning my hat over and over in my hands.

Ann Hikiro, the head, places the bones into their special plastic containers while the intern identifies each and marks off on a list. It is slow, careful work, and every few moments they stop for more pictures. Gently, gently, Hikiro's gloved hands lift out the pelvis and gently wipe at the clods of mud that stick to the edge. She holds it out to the intern. "Well? What do you think?"

The girl blinks, reaches out but doesn't touch. "Oh, female. For sure." There is a forensic anthropologist working for the state, but he is at the conference with the medical examiners. The intern is the best they can do for an osteology expert before Monday.

Hikiro nods, pads the pelvis, boxes it. Then a bunch of smaller bones, part of one of the hands. The intern rattles off the names, which the assistant scribbles on the outside of little baggies.

I could never tell hand bones apart. Although to be honest, I never tried very hard.

Then the skull, close to the bottom of the sloppy pile. She turns it over, holds it out. "You said one of your deputies found a mark on one of the teeth?" So she carries it into the sunlight and everyone admires the tiny, sharp chip. And then the round skull too goes into a box.

More bones, and more pictures. Then, rummaging around in the mud, Hikiro produces a tiny, black... something. It is dark and sharp between her gloved fingers. "Small caliber rifle," she says, slipping it into the tiny bag her assistant holds out.
"May I see it?" Jim says, and carries it out into the light.

When she has found all she can with her hands, Hikiro and the assistant take small shovels and begin to scrape the top several inches of the cave floor into crates as well. Then it is time for the small opening high in the wall.

Hikiro turns to Lorain Alwell, one of the deputies on duty. There is a reason Lorain is here; she isn't quite five feet tall. Somewhere Dorset County probably has a height regulation on the books, but we all 'forget' to look at it. Lorain is a local girl who graduated cum laude from State last year with a major in criminology. Jim thinks she is just biding time here in the sticks until she gains some experience, and her real goal is some kind of political career. In the meantime, we get the benefit of her education and she puts a third woman on the force.

It is Lorain who squeezes into the corner and leans her head and shoulders in to take pictures of the inside of the hole. Then Jim, ducking, lifts her all the way in. She could have scrambled up herself, but scrambling is not what we are going for.

Her knees stick out of the narrow slot, backlit by splashes from her megawatt flashlight. Slowly she passes out scraps of - Leather? Odd soggy wood? - already bagged. And then bag after bag of dirt. Practically all the 'evidence' we have is dirt.

When it is over, Loraine is filthy. Jim sends her home to change. The out-of-towners we take to lunch at Mom's before we send them on their way. Lunch is full of cop shop-talk, nothing special. Hikiro promises to let us know as soon as they learn anything.

It is nearly one-thirty when we pull off the gravel road onto our drive. I keep myself from getting antsy by thinking of the anonymous dead woman who's been hidden in hole for God-knows-how-many years. I wonder what her name was and where she came from and who missed her. I wonder who shot her and stuffed her in a crevice so small it barely gave tiny, little Loraine room to move. I think about kids from the high school, all those years sneaking up to neck or cut class (or both), never knowing they had a silent witness.

So I almost don't notice the car in our driveway. Or almost forget to notice. I don't recognize it, but it is clearly new, so I wouldn't.

"Expecting someone, Chief?" Jim asks as we pull up beside it.

"Well, that depends." I pretend to scratch my beard thoughtfully. "If you mean was I expecting someone in the general sense of how people do, sometimes, stop by, well then no. If, however, you meant it in the specific sense of was some one invited, then I'd have to say I couldn't answer that."

Jim is halfway out of the car by the time I finish, and he pauses to smell the air. His eyes fly back down to me, hopeful and surprised. "Simon?" he breathes.

Before I can answer, the door swings open and Simon saunters down the front steps. "Well, look what the cat finally drug in! I wasn't expecting a party in my honor, but you might have least have baked a cake -" He is cut off by Jim, who hugs him hard enough to nearly take him off his feet. "Whoa there."

"Simon, what are you doing here?"

"Well, I heard you got a couple of pretty good jazz bands coming. And, of course I had to see this place. Even Joel's been up here."

"Wow! This is -- this is -- Well, it's a surprise, for one thing!" Jim turns to me. "How did you pull
this off? I mean -- you knew!"

"Not a word said out loud, man. Set it up by e-mail." My fingers dance in the air, typing.

"He wrote me last night to say you'd be out this morning, but just to come on in." Simon laughs and holds out the spare key I had hidden under the flower pot out back. I wave for him to keep it.

Jim laughs and hugs Simon again. He hasn't seen Simon since Daryl's wedding in January. "Have you had lunch? I think there's some leftover steak in the fridge."

"Buffalo?" Simon says hopefully.

"What else?" As he crosses the threshold, Jim turns and whispers over his shoulder, "Thanks, Chief."

"You're not mad?"

He blinks. "What, mad? Why? This is fantastic. I just wish we were going to have more free time."

I follow him in to see about finding Simon some lunch. In the end, Jim slices the steak for a sandwich while I carry Simon's bag to the room that used to be mine. Of course, he protests, "Look, Sandburg, I don't want to put you out of your room. I'll take the couch."

"Don't worry about it. I'll bunk with Jim. We'll be fine." Jim had the bigger bed, not to mention the one that fit the five-hundred thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets.

"It isn't --"

"It's fine. Really."

Simon looks around 'my' room, the one that doesn't really look lived in, and I can see him wondering. I am pretty sure the first thing he is wondering is if Jim has taken to sleeping with me as though I were some kind of teddy bear, like a weird sentinel pacifier. The second thing he wonders really seems to embarrass him, because he looks away for a moment. Then he swallows and says, "Jim looks good."

"He's fine. Better than he's been in years."

Simon nods, and I realize that is the last he's going to say about it. Whatever he thinks 'it' is.

Over lunch we catch up on the news. First Simon's big surprise: Daryl and his wife are expecting. Their baby girl is due in about six months. "I'd be handing out cigars already if I still smoked. I thought that boy would never settle down." Nine years ago, Daryl and his dad had compromised; Daryl went to college, but he majored in law enforcement, intending to go to the police academy afterward. Once he started to learn about the system, though, he'd begun to see other possibilities - and other jobs that needed to be done. He's a junior prosecutor up the road in Seattle, and doing quite well.

"We'll have to come up when the baby's born," Jim says.

"I hope you'll come sooner than that. Joel is retiring next month. Maybe you could make it for the party."

I nearly spill my beer. "You are kidding me! Joel is not that old."

"Just about, yeah. But that isn't why. They're selling the company."
"Wow," I say, because I feel like I should say something.

"Some big international is buying them out. For a lot of money. A lot. It all happened last week."

"Wow." After he left the PD, Joel spent a couple of years working for a private security company, helping custom-design electronic systems and security check points for large public buildings. One night over pizza, he and a coworker who was in charge of the computer hardware end of things came up with an idea for a new bomb-dismantling robot. Joel called his nephew, who had just gotten his degree in business. They made the kid a partner, and he took care of the patent and incorporation details and loans and - poof! Suddenly there was a company and Joel was an entrepreneur. Their robot turned out to be a winner, lightyears ahead of anything coming out of Europe.

"The price was right. The time was right . . . Joel's buying a boat."

"Wow," I say.

Jim nods. "Yeah, of course we'll come."

When we're caught up on the news from back home, Simon asks Jim how he's liking things here.

"Oh, it's wonderful. Very quiet. We haven't had a serial killer in... how long has it been, Blair?"

"Let me think ... Well, there was last May - no, wait. That wasn't a serial killer. January? No, no. You know, Jim, I think it's possible that we've never had a serial killer."

"Really? Are you sure?"


"Well, Simon, there you go."

Simon laughs. "But -- come on. Tell me you aren't bored."

"Well, it's true there's a lot of paper serving and traffic duty - "

I grin. "What's the word for something that's simultaneously stultifying and nerve-wracking?"

"It has its moments," Jim says. "Lost hikers. Lost kids. Fields of marijuana out in the hills or in people's basements. The occasional semi wreck."

"Shoplifting. Caribou wandering through town," I add, and Jim aims a whack at my arm.

"Last year the mayor of Bickford's poker game got robbed."

Simon shoots Jim a sour look. "That sounds like a high profile case."

Jim sucks his teeth. "The mayor, two county commissioners, the Bickford police chief, and the owner of the candy factory. Regular poker game, you know. They play for practically nothing or candy from the factory. Mostly an excuse to drink beer and bullshit. Armed guy in a mask walked in and demanded all the money they had on them, told them to take off all their clothes, and walked out with everything - including their underwear."

"My God. You're kidding."

"Nope."
"Jim was supposed to be there, actually," I add, "but he was home with a cold."

"Anybody catch the guy?"

"Nope. Nobody could ID him, no prints, nobody even saw the car." Jim sounds as disgusted now as he did last October.

"With the police chief right there?" Simon looks deeply appalled. "How much did they get?"

"About eight hundred dollars plus the underwear."

"Damn. That's . . . embarrassing."

"And as annoying as hell. But it's not a serial killer." Jim takes a big swallow of beer.

"Blair's last e-mail did say something about a possible murder?" Simon asks.

So we tell him what two of our high school kids found in the cave, and the problems you get with not having your own high-tech forensics department. Then Simon starts telling stories from Cascade, although since his promotion last summer he doesn't get out into the field much anymore. Before we know it, afternoon has turned to evening. We fix dinner, still talking.

Everything seems... the same. A normal evening with Simon. Which is good, because I was... well, I was worried. About what Simon would think about Jim and me. We've seen so little of him since the move, and this is his first trip out here, where it would be most obvious that things have changed and Jim and I are together. I was kind of -- I was kind of afraid.

The thing is I am not, at this stage in my life, particularly anxious to force one of our oldest and closest friends to make a choice between us and whatever prejudices or morals he may have, or take a stand for gay rights, or have to think about Jim and me doing things he would be trying not to think about even if we were a het couple. I can't make sharing my opinion of human sexuality the price of my friendship with Simon any more than I can make sharing my opinion about native religions the price for Reverend and Mrs. Hurley.

But while I won't push him into a corner with a formal Coming Out, I won't go out of my way to hide it, either. I'm not ashamed of Jim. I'm not ashamed of myself.

Jim offered. To come out to his family, to our friends in Cascade. He offered to claim me publicly, even have a wedding, although he hadn't particularly enjoyed his first one and didn't see how it had been much help. Which was really, really sweet of him. I thought about it hard, because, while I didn't feel like I needed a wedding, I know what they do for a couple socially, and the benefits aren't something you pass up lightly. But, no. In the end I decided not to. For a lot of reasons.

Because I didn't feel like either of us needed it emotionally.

Because police departments don't partner couples for good reasons, and we couldn't explain why Jim needed to be an exception.

Because it wouldn't be legal in Washington, and what we needed to ensure our rights to each other and our property was a good lawyer, not a minister.

Because although my mother has recently gotten sentimental enough to want me to have a beautiful wedding, what she really cares about is how Jim and I feel about each other and how we treat each other.
Because Jim's dad had already had to leap that kind of hoop once, and it didn't seem fair to make him do it again, in public. Bill has accepted Jim and his 'differences,' and me the horrifying radical deviant, and our weird friendship, and whatever else he imagined we might be doing (for all he knows, we have been sleeping together all along). Bill loved his son and accepted me, and we knew it without forcing the old man to publicly prove it by giving a groom away.

But I didn't see how we could create an elaborate charade, pretend to be people we weren't to the people who loved us. That worried me. What if Stacey or Simon or Joel or Bill found themselves in a position where they couldn't just ignore it? What if they wound up backed into a corner and having to choose between what they thought was right and normal and - us? What if they didn't love us enough to choose us?

As bad as that would be for me, what would that do to Jim?

We were lucky things went as well as they did with Stacey, but did I really want to push our luck?

Tonight, though, everything is good. It looked to me like Simon let himself think things through at the bedroom door this afternoon, and he didn't run screaming for the hills. Jim and I are the same men we always were and so is Simon. Dinner is normal. The coffee is good. The company is wonderful.

I am happy when I slide into bed beside Jim.

I am not happy when I wake up around two o'clock, shaking inwardly from the nightmare. I am not awake enough to be free of it, or the heaviness of sleep, but God, I wish I were. As hard as it is to stay awake, I'm going to for a while, until the details of this are lost.

Loosing Jim. The genre of nightmare I hate most.

There are all kinds of sub-genres: Jim killed on the job, Jim sick, Jim packing up and leaving. This was one of the Jim-gets-recalled-by-the-army ones. God. God. I take a deep breath, trying not to wake him. Trying to forget.

But the dream is still vivid, in all its variations: in each, the army comes to our door at the loft, and although sometimes Jim fights them and sometimes he just meekly gets his uniform and goes, this time he tried to run. He tried to run and they chased him and caught him and piled on him, bringing him down. There were so many of them, and so much bigger than me. They piled on him and piled on him, until all I could see was green camouflage.

It is all I am seeing now, although I am awake and staring into darkness. I am home. In our little house outside of Ithaca. Home. And Jim is safe, beside me. I can hear him breathing, feel his warmth. He is here.

He rolls over, slides an arm over my middle and rests his cheek on my shoulder. "Nightmare, Chief?" he whispers.

"Yeah." I wrap the arm he is not laying on around him. See? He is safe.

"Which one?"

"Army. Hey. Be all you can be." It comes out a bitter whisper, and embarrassingly shaky.

He squeezes me tightly.

"Sorry I woke you."
"You know, they hardly ever recall anyone after the first five years. I'm long past the point where I'd be any good to them. I can't do the things they'd call me back for."

"What do you mean?"

He sighs and pats my arm. "I'm headed for fifty, Blair. I wouldn't be up to it."

"You're a long way from fifty, Jim, and you're fine!" I continue even though he is shaking his head, "Sheriff is a big job in a county this size, and you do a fantastic job."

"How long would I be able to, sleeping on the ground with strangers? Eating MREs? Exposed to God knows what?" He pulls away a bit, rolling to lie on his back.

I pursue, rising on to my elbow to look down on him. "Are you feeling all right? Are you comfortable in your body?" I am wide awake now, although I am still talking softly.

"Yeah, fine. Blair, it isn't that. I can't even remember the last time I had a headache."

It was June 17. I take notes. But it wasn't a very bad one. "How are the magic numbers?"

"Good. Really." He slides his arm underneath me, holding me at the waist. "I check every two hours and every time you ask. I'm on top of it."

"So what is it?"

"Nothing," he says.

"Nothing." I lay my hand on his stomach.

"Nothing."

I push down the sheet, seeking proof that there really is nothing wrong. We are naked beneath the covers - skin to skin, always. Jim is solid and warm, hard muscle under silky skin. I lean down and tickle that skin with my soft beard. I start to ease back so he has a chance to say no if he wants to.

He catches me and pulls me closer, meeting me in an urgent kiss. Then he buries his face in my neck, tasting and teasing me. There is no turn-on in the world like having your body enjoyed. His hands linger on my shoulders, my chest. Every caress is slow and delicate and focused, and it makes me burn. He is the best lover I've ever had, even though I know that this is not because he is better at it, but because I would rather have him touch me than anyone else in the world.

But... he is so good at it. Every touch is perfect because he knows, knows how I respond to each one. When I burn and ache and thirst for him, he feels it, and loves the feeling of it.

Drugged by the reverent, devouring slide of his hands I manage to whisper, "How much?"

"Yes! Everything!" I can barely hear him over the sound of my own heart. Whoops. If he wants 'everything' I'm going to have to get my act together and pay a bit more attention to what I am doing.

We discovered pretty quickly that for Jim, sex with me could be orders of magnitude different than with anybody else. With someone who didn't know about him, he had to stay alert, watch himself so he didn't zone. Even during orgasm he had to remain present. (No, I don't know how he did it.) Also, when he's aroused and his body is flooding with raw sensation, he's very vulnerable. Letting himself be wide open would be disastrous if a lover were rough or even a little careless.

Me, though, he trusts. Not just not to freak if sometimes something weird happens, and not just not to
decide that nipping would be fun in the middle of things. With me he lets go. With me Mr. Control Freak lets his sensations and feelings take over, and he stops being practical and responsible and strong.

We don't do it a lot, though. He can only handle *everything* once or twice a month. Why? Well, if it were me, getting loved until I passed out nightly would sound like a pretty good deal, but Jim is not me. Being out of control like that, even with me, takes a lot of courage and energy. Sensory overload is sensory overload, even when it's pleasure. It's overwhelming and exhausting, and, if it happens too often, it makes him kind of twitchy and tense. Most of the time, when we're loving, he holds some of himself back, protects himself a little.

But he doesn't want stay in charge right now, which means I better be damn sure I pay attention to what I'm doing.

I nudge him over onto his stomach and bury my face in the small of his back. Gently, with my tongue, my lips, I begin to work the soft skin. He is least sensitive here, but immensely susceptible to pleasure. I go slow: even the smallest gesture carries a lot of sensation, and Jim's body is capable of processing a lot of it and for a long time. If I don't rush him, I can put him in a very nice place and keep him there for an eternity.

He is soft and salty, and heaving under me, panting. My own parts are pressed between us and I am almost painfully hard. I don't want to think about that yet, not yet, not yet.

Jim is - God, so beautiful, so perfect! I reach his neck, nuzzle and suck at the junction of his shoulder. He is trembling now and I realize he's too far gone to stop and wait while I dig protection out of the bedside table. Although Ithaca is not Cascade and the chances of contact with bloodborne diseases on the job are much smaller here, there will still be no penetration without protection. Ever.

So I will have to be creative. I turn him so he is facing me and trace my fingers over his jaw, into the soft place under his chin. I suck lightly at his throat. He pants and tries to say something, possibly my name. I run my tongue along his ear, and he shudders. Then, showing remarkable self-possession, he reaches up and finds me with his hand.

Somehow, although I had lots more in mind involving his nipples, his belly, his groin, it all gets away from me very quickly. He strokes me maybe three times and I come in a fireball that spreads backwards up through my nervous system. I cannot marshal the concentration to touch him -- hell, I can barely manage not to fall on him. But something, maybe the smell, pushes him over in a moment anyway, and he freezes beneath me, unable to move, forgetting to breathe.

It is long minutes before I can manage to ease away and dig out the baby wipes. I warm the cloth in my hands and warn him before I touch him with it, but he still jumps a little. Whispering and stroking his face, I clean him with the other hand, then myself. He slides toward me as I lie down, burying his face in my short hair. "Love you," he whispers.

I pull him closer. "You ok?"

The answer is a weak nod.

"You ended it kind of fast, Jim. Was something wrong?"

"Just wanted to feel you come while I was still aware of what was going on." I can barely understand the mumble, but he holds me tightly, a silent promise that he really is ok. He is sweet and warm and heavy in his afterglow. Beautiful to hold. We are asleep in a few minutes.
We take Simon in to work with us the next morning. The state has sent us the crime scene photos over the computer but they won't even have a preliminary report for a few days. We pass the pictures back and forth, wondering aloud "how long" and "who." It is frustrating, to have a murder victim without a face. Something hidden in the ground so long... it is familiar, but out of place. These bones belong to museums and Dr. Couch and old cardboard boxes filled with excelsior. It doesn't seem right to see them here, in this life.

My reaction is almost as odd to me as what I'm reacting to. Why shouldn't this feel normal? It's not like I've become someone else. I mean, when I talk to the Hurleys about the best way to cook guinea pig or why you can't use 'army of God' metaphors when proselytizing to Russians or how the Lord's Prayer looks when translated into Lakota... it seems perfectly normal and natural, even if stuff comes up that I haven't thought of in years.

I wish this woman had a name. I wish we were only looking for who killed her, not hopelessly searching through dust -- well, mud -- trying to guess who she was when she was someone years ago.

I wish she were in a museum, a relic from another age, and not some innocent victim for whom we are responsible for finding justice. We don't even have a missing person's report we could start with. At ten, the county commissioners come in to talk with Jim, and Simon and I go for coffee. Simon doesn't say much until we're on the way back from the diner, carrying some of Brittany's good coffee back for Jim and Sherry, too. "Well. It's picturesque."

I laugh. "It's small. But we can do what needs to be done to take care of it."

Simon shrugs, then grows serious. "Jim looks like he's in pretty good shape."

"Cascade is just... too much. Not just the job there. The city. There is a lot we can bring to Dorset County. A lot. It's been very good for us."

Simon nods, disappointed I think, but understanding. During the last six months or so in Cascade, Simon was spending more time minimizing notice of Jim's frequent illnesses than of his senses.

At 11:00 the Sheriff's Department blocks off Main Street in Ithaca from the three-way intersection across from the Five and Dime all the way down to Mom's Diner two blocks past the courthouse. This is where the craft vendors will set up their stalls and tables. Passing through town will have to happen through the little winding back streets. The tiny park catty-corner from the courthouse is already filled with folding tables and benches, with a couple of hoses run for the food vendors. The street just in front of the Court House will be left open, for street dancing, and the top of the courthouse steps is where the jazz groups will perform tonight.

Naturally it doesn't go smoothly. Three cars are still parked on the street - we scramble to get them ticketed and towed. Miss Lillian and the daughter of one of her Craft Committee members are hurrying to chalk numbers in evenly spaced sections up and down the sidewalk.

On the other side of town, on the ball field of Ithaca Elementary, a small carnival has been setting up all day. Ferris wheel, tilt-a-whirl, merry-go-round, games. Traveling carnivals make Jim nervous. He can hear metal fatigue. Every hour or so he walks from Main Street to the school, just to check. I ask him, each time he comes back, how it looks. He just shrugs and grunts: they haven't put up a death trap yet.

Though he passes Miss Lillian several times he doesn't look at her. She doesn't look at him. She knows something about his murder case. Sooner or later he's going to get the lab reports back and
then he's going to have to Investigate and Ask Some Questions.

I stay on Main Street with Lorain and Elliot, the three of us just being highly visible. We direct traffic and give directions. The vendors descend in a storm, quilters and wood carvers and weavers and jewelry makers and potters. There is an actual smith, and Elliot and I help him unload some of the really heavy God-knows-whats that are used to make decorative ironwork. Simon, fascinated, stays to watch him assemble the portable smithy. Loraine and I go watch the Humane Society volunteers set up a display -- they have brought four puppies for adoption and have some fliers on spay-and-neuter (the vet comes in every second Friday). Next to the puppies, an old couple putting out homemade jam and local honey give us free samples of comb.

I nibble at a corner but leave the rest in its little paper cup to share with Jim. It's close to five, opening time for the vendors. I'm getting kind of hungry; lunch was sandwiches grabbed out of the fridge in the kitchenette before blockading the street. Is it too much to hope the food concessions in the park will sell something edible?

It's in the park that I spot Jim, just finishing a sno-cone. Which shows that they are open, at least. Still carrying my little gob of wax and honey, I cross the street and head for him. When he notices me, though, Jim looks quickly away. As I get close, I can see why.

"Tell me that wasn't electric blue." I nod at the nearly empty sno-cone cup.

"Blair -"

Trying to look casual and unconcerned I hustle him behind the nearest tree. "What the hell is the matter with you lately?"

"Blair, it's not a big deal."

"Really? Maybe this isn't such a big deal," and I take the paper cone away from him, "although you picked a hell of a time for it! But this pattern I've been seeing lately sure as hell is."

"What pattern? Don't you think you're over-reacting a little?"

"Picking out defoliants? Playing with insecticide?"

"It's not -- I didn't -- I'm not --"

"You're not what, Jim? Not being really stupid? Not being self-destructive? What am I supposed to make of this?"

"Self-destructive . . ." But I barely hear him.

"Are you trying to get my attention? Well, you've got it now! Or -- what? Are you trying to punish me? Is that it? Is this about the jealousy thing?"

It is the look on his face, shocked and horrified, that stops me. "What? No! God, Chief."

"No?"

"No! It has nothing to do with you!" He stops, breathes, lowers his voice. "I just wanted a damn sno-cone!"

"So you go for the one that fucks up your vision?"

"It's barely noticeable. You're acting like I'm guzzling strychnine!"
"Jim, you can't play around with crap like this."

"Oh, I am so sick and tired -- " He stops, clenching his teeth. It should be ironic, that Jim is keeping his temper and I am not.

"What, Jim?" I challenge him. "What are you tired of?"

"I'm tired of being so damn fragile!"

I blink. I was half-expecting him to say he was tired of me, bossing him around. "What?"

So he says it again, and it still doesn't make any sense. Jim is in the best shape he's been in five years. His bp is under control. He's not taking anything for his breathing and he doesn't need to. He's sleeping through the night and eating regularly and lifting weights in the spare room three times a week. "What the hell are you talking about? 'Fragile!' You're fine."

He lifts my hand, the one with the sticky sno-cone paper in it. "Everyone else can have electric blue if they want to. Everyone else can have a tidy lawn, or go to work the day after exterminator day, or drink imported bottled water, or build their damn dream house! Me -- everything, every damn, little thing seems to be unsafe for me!"

Although I am surprised and still angry (he is being ridiculous), I try to respond to his frustration. "Oh, man, that is so not true! Everybody has different . . . limitations. I know it seems like --"

"You don't understand!" It isn't loud, but it is angry, so I take a deep breath and try to get my temper under control.

I fail. "No. I don't understand. You're in control of your senses. You aren't sick. I'm not living in a constant state of panic -- no, you're damn right. I don't understand!"

He holds up his hands in angry mock-surrender. "All right. You know what? Fine. You're right. I was careless. It was stupid. I ate a crappy sno-cone that's probably going to give me a headache. I'm irresponsible and self-destructive. Now can we get back to work?"

He starts to turn away. I catch his sleeve. "Am I that bad?"


"Ah. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have, um . . ."

"Ripped me a new one?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I just -- you know."

"I know."

"So, you ok?"

A short, self-deprecating laugh. "Already feeling it." He takes his sunglasses out of the pouch on his belt. "Nope. Can't even tell I have them on."

"You wanna sit this out somewhere really dark? I can take you home, if you want."

"Naw. I'll be ok."

"Jim, if you're not..."
"I'll say something."

As we step out from the shade of the tree, Jim takes a deep breath and lays a hand on my arm. It's painfully bright for him. The little park is still pretty empty, just the food vendors and one or two earlybirds, but it is still more audience than I'd like. I take a deep breath too and try to look casual.

"Jim . . . if wanting a house is that important to you..."

"I understand. You're right. I'm sorry." A stiff, embarrassed surrender.

"I'll think about it. Maybe we can work something out."

He turns to look at me, pulling his hat down to shade his eyes a bit more. "Right."

"I can at least be willing to look into it. I'm not changing my mind about weed-killer, though. You mention it again and I'll pave the front yard and paint it green."

"Might be tough, since we're renting."

We walk slowly up and down the street, looking visible. Slowly, because Jim isn't really watching where he's going. The festival is technically open now, and people are beginning to trickle in. I have the duty roster for this shindig memorized, and we call everyone over the radio for a check in. Or rather I do; Jim lets me do the talking. Lorain over by the carnival says that they expect to open on time at six. Dave and Joey, parked out by the highway, tell me the traffic is picking up. Elliot, at the empty lot on the edge of town that has been pressed into a service as a parking lot, says that people are behaving themselves. I go down the list. Everyone checks in. Everyone is fine.

A balloon artist sets up shop on the corner, animals popping to life under his hands. Two squealing children race past us, thrilled by the novel idea of being able to run in the street. On the 'stage' the first set of musicians begins to warm up.

The Dorset County Folk Music Festival is too new (and too impoverished) to attract any really big names (relatively speaking) in America's non-corporate music world. We couldn't even have filled the ticket with one genera of performers. Thus, this year's theme is 'eclectic.' Americana at its best. We have two jazz groups, both of which will play tonight downtown. Tomorrow we have two Bluegrass duos, three singer/songwriters who don't belong to any particular style, Leoda Sue and Earl who sing something called 'red dirt music,' and, oddly, a troupe of Ukrainian folk-dancers who happened to be touring in Tacoma. It was the best line-up we could come up with. It may lack a theme, but it will be very good music.

Simon, catching sight of us across the street, waves his hot dog at us and comes over. "Where've you all been?"

"Here and there," I say vaguely. I look pointedly at his hot dog. "I hope you got that from Friends of the Library and not the Football Boosters?"

Simon blinks. "Oh, come on Sandburg. I knew you were a bookworm, but where's your team spirit?"

Through his sunglasses, Jim and I exchange a look like one of the ones that used to irk Simon back in our heyday. "Oh, it isn't that," I say casually. "It's a quality issue."

"The Football Boosters use the cheap hotdogs," Jim clarifies.

"And the generic catsup."
"You're kidding me," Simon says, looking at his hotdog in dismay. He shrugs and pops the rest into his mouth.

The music is finally about to start. Stu Smith, from the radio station in Chelan, does the introductions. Of course, he starts by thanking everybody and giving a nice little speech of welcome. Still, he manages to make the most boring part of any event mercifully short. The duo steps forward and jumps into their first number, and the three of us ease off down the street away from the speakers. Jim has industrial ear plugs in, but still. Sentinels were designed for acoustic music, not amplifiers.

We take a bench on the far side of the park. The sun hasn't gone behind the mountains yet, and Jim sits with his back to it. Simon leans back, satisfied to listen to the music. I watch the crowd. I can see up and down the street. Kids and parents. Dating teen-agers. Little old ladies admiring quilts at one of the stalls. Nothing of cop-worthy notice. Between numbers, I can hear the faint echoes of squealing kids from the carnival. They sound like they're having fun.

At the far end of the street is the Channel 5 news van from Chelan. Covering the festival, I presume, and they do film the musicians for a few minutes. But then I watch them ease around the back of the crowd, slowly, purposefully, headed this way. Shit. "Jim, there's a news team looking for trouble. Want to make a break for it?"

"Unfortunately, it's my job to talk to them, now." But he plays it cool, not noticing the suave, glossy, young reporter until he speaks. Then, when he must notice, turning slowly and calmly to look up. Jim is the very image of unimpressed.

"Sheriff, if I might have a moment of your time?"

Jim just nods, polite, but unhurried and completely inscrutable.

"Rumor has it that the Bickford County Sheriff's Department left the body of a murder victim on the floor of a cave for two days. Is this true?" I wonder if the rumor mill really is saying something off the wall or if this pretty boy is trying to be provocative.

Jim just stands up, still slowly. "We don't have official word that it was a murder victim, although I believe that to be the case."

The reporter is a lot shorter than Jim, but he's gamely trying to look unimpressed. Almost managing it, I'll say that much for him. "But the body wasn't actually retrieved as soon as it was discovered?"

"I didn't feel we had the equipment or training to do the job properly ourselves. We protected the site until the state was able to send a team."

"Do you have any leads about the identity of the victim at this time?"

I am standing just to one side, so I can see him wince, just a little, behind his sunglasses. "Not at this time, no."

"What about -- "

"No further questions." Jim's smile looks more like a threat display than happiness. He turns his back to the reporters and says to Simon and me, "Hot dog, anyone? On me."

We head toward the park. When the reporter and his cameraman are well behind us, I whisper, "Putz." Jim laughs and relaxes slightly. Simon elbows him in the ribs. "Turning into a regular politician, there, Ellison."
"Be careful, sir. I can still take you."

"Still? You could never take me!"

Jim laughs, and he sounds almost normal to me. "Memory's the first to go."

"Are you saying I'm old?"

"Well, if the shoe fits..."

From the police perspective, it is a quiet night, all round. Elliot reports breaking up a fight in the parking lot. The two combatants don't give him any trouble, and Elliot sends them home rather than bringing them in. A lost child comes to Loraine for help at the carnival, but the frantic mom shows up even before our deputy is finished making her report to Jim over the radio. Even with encores and a small technical difficulty, the concert is over by ten-thirty, and almost everyone has cleared out by eleven, including the sound man. Jim does the last radio check-in himself and turns loose everyone who is going off-shift. Millie will be in charge of the overnight: two deputies in Ithaca, one at the fairgrounds, and Millie herself driving a circuit from the fairgrounds to Bickford to the high school.

At home, I send Jim in for the first shower, and pour glasses of milk for Simon and myself. "Jim all right?"

"Sure." I cap the milk and put it back in the fridge, giving Simon my best 'why wouldn't he be?' look.

"Don't play innocent with me, Sandburg. You may fool these nice hillbillies, but I've been babysitting the two of you since before you could read a forensics report. Besides, he let you drive home."

"He ate something that disagreed with him. He'll be fine tomorrow. Really."

Simon studies me for a moment longer and nods. He doesn't want to know the details. Even when he needed to know them, he didn't want to. Not that he doesn't care, really, and not even that he wants to give us some privacy. He doesn't want to have to look too closely at things that will change his basic idea of how the universe works. Jim doing the impossible several times every day (not to mention the mystical issues that popped up occasionally) just stretches the boundaries of 'real' and 'normal' a little too far. That's why he only asks questions if he thinks we might need help and why (no matter what he thinks is going on) he will never ask about our unused bedroom.

See? He already looks satisfied. I change the subject. "So? What do you think? Can we throw a party?"

"They were good, I'll give you that. I never seem to have time to see live music anymore."

"I think you'll like tomorrow, too. Well, maybe not the red dirt music; it's kind of... rustic. But intelligent and passionate."

"Uh, huh," he says doubtfully.

"The music is out at the fairgrounds tomorrow, but the parade is in Bickford and everything else in Ithaca. We're hoping next year to have storytellers downtown for at least part of Saturday."

We talk about the details of setting up civic events and security, and then I head off to the shower. As soon as politeness permits, but not as soon as I would like to. I rush the shower and hurry to bed. The room is dark, but Jim is still awake. I touch his shoulder and he turns hesitantly toward me. I open
my arms and he burrows into them.

"Did you take something?"

A single nod, and then, "It isn't bad." Comparatively, for Jim, it probably isn't.

I hold him and we breathe together for a while. I'm concerned at first, because I'm still wired from the day and a little worried about him. To be any use to Jim I have to be centered.

Yeah, it turns out I'm right, and he notices. Jim lifts his hand and strokes my cheek, trying to comfort me. "I wouldn't... do something stupid to hurt you, Blair. No matter how angry I was."

I smile because he is just so damn impressive. I know how much he would prefer to pretend that conversation never happened, let alone offer to 'work it out.' "I can't believe I said that. It was completely out of line. I'm sorry."

"You were pretty mad."

"Yeah. Well. I was blowing things out of proportion. I'm way overprotective." I force a smile. "I'm obsessed with you, and I'm big enough to admit that." But isn't it bad enough we're in a profession where people shoot at us without Jim sabotaging himself? Wasting his energy coping with headaches he could avoid? Was it too much to ask that he not deliberately make life harder for both of us?

In my arms Jim chuckles. "Obsessed? Really? I hadn't noticed." I hold him for a moment, breathing him in, letting us both rest. His thumb is ghosting over my cheek, still comforting me. The little core of anger inside me dissolves. This wasn't about me. Jim's world is full of chaos and danger. I understand it, but I don't have to live with it. Even though I would do anything to protect him, we both know that sometimes it isn't enough. Despite the best I can do, sometimes even the simplest things are difficult or exhausting or deadly. It's not like this was the first time Jim dealt with his own weakness or fear by doing something dangerous. I just usually see it for what it is and manage to keep my mouth shut. Maybe if I hadn't been so worried about the jealousy thing I would have seen it this time, too. Really, how bad was it? I mean, after you've set up and closed a drug-bust while completely blind, does an artificial flavoring that increases photosensitivity even show up on the radar as "dangerous?"

Only as I relax do I notice that I was even stiff. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"I love you." He scoots down a little and rests his forehead against my chest. I think he falls asleep before me, but not by much.

The next morning sees us up early and silently. We are out the door before Simon even wakes up. He's on vacation, after all. We stop by the office first, but nothing has come in on the case, either from the lab or from the state data clearinghouse.

By eight-thirty we are parked at the high school, where the parade is already lining up. There are six floats -- tow-carts and the beds of pick-up trucks decked out in chicken wire and paper napkins and crepe. Over by the gym a horse trailer is disgorging two beautiful chestnut mares, and Jim pauses for a moment, his eyes lingering on the big animals. Next to the horses, Elliot is standing beside the Sheriff's Department SUV with Doris and the varsity cheerleaders. Both Doris and the SUV are freshly washed to the point of glowing, and Elliot looks so proud he is ready to pop. He waves at Jim and me while the cheerleaders eagerly pet the police dog.

"Thank God," Jim mutters.

"What?"
"If that dog weren't more popular than me, I might have to be in the parade."

I stop myself from making a tasteless, and, all things considered, pointless comment about the cheerleaders.

Marty rushes up, flipping through the pages on his clipboard. "Where are you supposed to be? I don't see you on the list."

"We're not in the parade," I say gently. "We're security."

Marty looks up from his list, brushing his grey hair out of his eyes. "Oh. Hey. Sorry, Sheriff. Blair. Hi."

"Need any help? Everything under control here?"

"Nope. Thanks. Everything's fine." Marty is scurrying off even before he has finished speaking.

Jim laughs quietly. "Oh, yeah. Everything is under control here." He restlessly crosses the parking lot, focused and alert. His eyes stray to the hill rising behind the gym. You can't see the cemetery from here, or the cave. Too many trees. "Have I mentioned how much I'm enjoying this festival?"

"It'll all be over by tomorrow," I say, hoping that's encouraging.

"Not soon enough."

"What do you want to do now?"

"Hmmm. Let's head on into town." It turns out he wants to walk. Yes, really. We leave the high school just as Lorain blocks the road behind us with her car. Traffic will be allowed out of town for a while yet, but nobody goes in this way until the parade is over.

It is a beautiful morning, a little cloudy yet, but not really damp or cold. The day is going to be bright and warm. A perfect day to spend snarfing hotdogs and cotton candy and listening to music. Jim relaxes as we walk, and picks up speed. At first we pass mostly trees: the evenly spaced, tidy trees of orchards and the tangle of brush and tall weeds that make up little bits of free forest. Trees slowly give way to houses. Most of them are brick or wood painted white, and most of them have low, white fences. Picturesque, but white-bread and tame. Behind one of the fences a little brown dog bounces up and down, barking at us.

Jim's mood continues to improve, and by the time we reach Bickford Elementary he is actually smiling. We pause there for a moment. Just past the school Cherry Street splits off Wenatchee Road. As the parade passes this point, the bands will feed into their proper places, go two blocks up the hill on Cherry, and then make a right onto Main Street, where most of the crowd will be waiting to cheer the parade on.

From the street we can see the school parking lot where the marching bands and VFW are already lining up. The nearer band is ours, from Dorset High. They seem to be standing around, except in rows. In their bright blue uniforms they somehow look both regimented and festive. The flag girls out front are wearing nothing but some kind of glittery swim-suit, and most of them have their flags wrapped around them trying to keep warm. I try to look at the kids' faces, wondering which ones are Douglas and Ali. From here I can't tell.

The further band is from Chelan. They're still warming up, blowing slow scales. "They sound pretty good," I say.
Jim sighs. "Only if you aren't particular about everybody being in the same key."

"You always get so hung up on the details . . ." But Jim freezes beside me and I stop mid-teasing. Very slowly he turns around, and I look to see what's up. Miss Lillian has just turned onto Cherry Street and is walking toward us down the hill just slightly faster than you'd expect from a woman her age. Which still gives us plenty of time to watch her approach, each stride measuring a neat, even length of sidewalk. She is carrying a large, straw handbag and several oversize books.

She doesn't hurry, but there is no doubt that she's headed toward us either, even before she steps off the sidewalk into the street. As she comes up, she nods once to me and looks up at Jim. "Good morning, Sheriff."

"Good morning, Mrs. Billings."

"Do you have a few minutes?"

"Certainly."

They are both so stiff, so . . . compressed. It feels like the air pressure has just gone up and up, crushing us by the weight of it. Miss Lillian looks exactly like always: perfect hair, perfect make-up, perfect shoes, perfectly composed. But today it seems hollow, somehow, like she is only an image of a woman. Jim, looking down at her, seems to be made of ice. Standing here on this picturesque, perfect street in the middle of his safe, innocent county is the woman who's fed him cookies and listened to him gripe about my housekeeping and talked him into coaching pee-wee football and never once asked either one of us about our love lives. She's part of his murder investigation.

With a graceful, absolutely steady hand, Miss Lillian offers Jim the books she is carrying and opens the one on top, a high school year book from 1954. "I think I have a name for you, Sheriff." We don't wonder what she is talking about.

Jim takes the book without looking at it. "We don't have anyone listed as missing who matches the description."

"No. You wouldn't. Everyone said she ran off to Hollywood to become a movie star the spring of her senior year. Embarrassing for her family, but I think half the town envied her, deep down. They certainly gossiped about it enough." She points to a page marked with green ribbon in the book Jim is holding. "Regina Miller."

I lean over to look at the page. The image is small and black and white and very like the others around it; identical smiles, identical dark drape and pearl necklace all girls wear for their senior pictures ... One face looks just like all the others: washed out and anonymous. Regina Miller is a girl with a wide smile and light hair in some kind of complicated knot: would I know her if she walked past me right now?

"Mrs. Billings, do you have some reason to believe she didn't 'run away to Hollywood'?"

"She was a year ahead of me. But you need to understand, Sheriff Ellison, that the high school was much, much smaller then. There were only about seventy-five people in my graduating class. We knew everyone else's business. Even people we weren't close to."

Jim nodded. "Yes, I see. Go on."

"All through high school, Regina... dated a young man named Vernon. They were a year ahead of me. In the spring of their senior year, Vernon caught Regina behaving indiscreetly with the captain of the football team in the rear of the school library. I remember there was a scene that seemed to last
for several days."

"What kind of scene?"

Miss Lillian thought for a moment. "Regina cried and begged. He refused to speak to her. After a while things settled down, except that none of them -- Regina, Vernon, or Ted, the team captain, would have anything to do with the others." She stopped, blinking rapidly.

"And then?" Jim whispers.

"Then she stopped coming to school. Everyone said she had run off to Hollywood to become famous and prove she was too good for either of them."

"Had she ever talked about doing that?"

"I don't know. We weren't friends."

Jim nods.

"After that ... Vernon graduated and joined the navy. Ted went to play football for some university. Northwestern Tech? I don't remember. A year later, I graduated and went away to teacher's college." Her voice is measured and careful, completely without accent, unless 'elderly' somehow counts as an accent.

"Miss Lillian," I say softly, "why do you think she didn't run away?"

"I remember, at the 20 year reunion of their class, some people were talking. No one had heard from her. Ever. Even her best friend Lucy. And then there was this." She takes a yellowed piece of old-fashioned notebook paper out of her straw bag. "I found it last night."

Jim's hand closes slowly around the paper, but Miss Lillian doesn't let go. She looks up into his eyes, her face empty and cold and absolutely calm. Jim has to swallow twice before he can ask his next question. "Why were you at that reunion? It wasn't your class."

She nods, as if this were the question she was waiting for. "I was there with my husband, Vernon Billings."

She lets go of the paper and Jim unfolds it slowly, holding it open on the book so I can read it too.

Vern--
I know you're mad, but I got to talk to you. I'm in trouble and I don't know what I'm gonna do if Daddy finds out. Please, please, please meet me in the usual place before school tomorrow.

R

I close my eyes, rubbing my hand across my beard. I don't know what to say, but Jim is still on top of things and saves me from having to say anything. "Do you know when this was written?"

"No, I don't. I'd never seen it at all until last night."

"What was 'the usual place'?"

"I don't know."

"So you don't know if he kept the appointment?"
"I don't know that either of them did."

Jim looks down at the note again. "Apparently it was after some argument . . ."

"Apparently."

Behind us the dozen or so members of the VFW move out into the street and line up their color guard. I can hear the distant engines that mean the parade is approaching. Jim takes Miss Lillian's arm and guides her onto the sidewalk across the street from the school. He glances down, composing his thoughts. "This letter by itself doesn't prove anything."

"No, Sheriff, it doesn't. This note may not be connected at all. Regina may, in fact, still be living in California at this moment."

"What about this best friend, ah, Lucy? And the football player?" He doesn't ask about Vernon. Miss Lillian has pictures of her husband up in her living room. We already know he died of cancer fifteen years ago, long before Jim and I had even met each other. We hadn't known his first name.

Miss Lillian reaches across to turn the page, pointing out the pictures of Lucy Wilder and Theodore Samuels. "Lucy married a portrait photographer and moved to Seattle. She may still be there. Ted, the team captain, ran the hardware store here in town until he died of a heart attack in 1993."

"I see. You said the high school was smaller when you were there. It wasn't in the same building, was it?"

"No. It's next to where the high school is now. They tore it down in 1976 to build the new gymnasium."

Jim nods slowly.

"I think that's all the useful information I have, Sheriff. Of course, if you have any questions later, I believe you have my number."

Jim's hand flutters over the book for a moment. "May I keep this for a while?"

"Certainly."

Jim offers her his hand. "Thank you, Miss Lillian."

"I would appreciate..."

"As soon as we know anything. I promise."

She nods to Jim and nods to me and turns to walk back up Cherry Street, climbing the slight hill with the same even, efficient gait she'd showed coming down. The heavy, icy, oppressiveness hangs in the air until she's more than a block away, and neither Jim nor I move until she turns the corner.

"My God," I whisper. "She can't really think her husband . . ."

"She doesn't think so. But he might be."

"God. That's so ... awful." By her standards, Jim and I must seem like kids. Those polite young men to whom she's fed cookies, who've served on committies with her, who caught the snake in her basement. Now she's had to bring us evidence that says her husband may have killed his girlfriend fifty years ago.
For a moment Jim gazes sadly up the street. "She doesn't want our pity, Chief. She just wants us to do our job."

A whistle blast jars us both. We turn to see the first band being called to attention. A blue classic convertible carrying the three county commissioners has pulled up behind the VFW color guard, and a float is coming around the corner.

The parade has arrived.

Jim folds up the note and tucks it into the yearbook, turns on his heel, and heads back the way we've come. He has long legs, and I nearly have to scamper to keep up. As usual, I'm the only one watching traffic. I keep myself between Jim and the parade he's not paying attention to. Just behind the county commissioners is the mayor of Bickford riding in a monster truck and then the first float, a giant red apple with kids wearing green hats peeking out of holes pretending to be worms. The festival performers are all in a hay wagon, doing their best to look quaint. Except for the East European folk dancers, who are waving from the back of a pick-up truck. They're costumed as peasants, if peasants wore really bright colors and sequins. Elliot drives the Sheriff's Dept SUV, with Doris's head sticking out of the passenger's side window and a nest of cheerleaders throwing candy out of the open rear hatch. They see us and toss a handful in our direction. Gum and lollipops fall around us like hail. Jim pays no attention -- even the horses fail to make him look up.

We get back to the high school where we left the car in much less time than it took to make the walk to town. The deputies who had blocked the road jump up when they see us coming, wondering if something might be wrong. Jim just waves them away and hustles me into the car.

Traffic is a bit heavy and weird because of the road closings and parade. Jim doesn't run the siren and speed around people, but I can tell he wants to. At the office we meet with yet another delay. The young part-timer who mans the desk on weekends is yelling at the computer, nearly in tears. For a moment Jim pauses, but I shove him toward his office and tell him to start without me.

"I'll be in in a minute, Jim. Ok, Karen, what happened?"

She speaks quietly, stepping away from the desk as though she's afraid the machine will overhear her. "This man from the state police called, wanted information on someone we arrested last month on a drunk and disorderly. But when I tried to open the records, they were gone. Blair. The whole month of July is gone." Her voice drops further. "I lost a whole month. The sheriff is going to kill me."

I don't waste time fussing with the server this time; I just go to the basement and fish out the back-ups again. What we really need is someone in to look at the network. Or a new server. But I don't know if either one is in the budget. In the mean time... extra backups.

I work as quickly as I can, but it is more than half an hour later before I join Jim at the computer in his office. "What have you got?"

"Birth certificate filled out by a visiting nurse in 1946 for Regina Anne Miller, Dorset County Washington. After that, nothing."

"Nothing?"

"No marriage license in California, Washington, Oregon, or Nevada. The rest of the country will take about an hour. No driver's license, ever, anywhere -- unless it's Delaware, they're upgrading their system today. No phone records or credit cards in California. No social security number. No passport."
"You're sure?"

Jim shrugs. "Some name matches, but the locations and dates are all wrong."

"Well. Shit."

"It doesn't prove anything. She could have changed her name."

"True. She could be in Delaware."

Silently we study the books laid out on Jim's desk. There are four high school year books, all of them open to pages showing Regina Miller, Vernon Billings, Ted Samuels, or Lucy Wilder. Beside them is a personal scrapbook; a few grainy photos from the fifties, a news clipping from when Dorset High went to the regional finals in football, a dried flower, some newer pictures of high school reunions and church picnics. Jim flips through the pages and points to one of the older pictures; a bunch of teen-agers in the prim, tight, covering clothing of the fifties. The hand-written caption says, "Chess Club Field Trip to the State Capital, March 1953." Jim points to a blonde girl with a limp skirt and a perky pony tail. "This is her."

If she's alive, that girl is older than Miss Lillian. She probably has grandchildren.

She is probably not alive.

"So what next?"

Jim tears his eyes away from the faded photo. "Lucy Wilder." It takes less than five minutes to find out that Lucy Wilder died six years ago of pneumonia in Tacoma.

There were sixty-one other students in that class, and we start searching for them next. Maybe they know something. Maybe they know where Regina is now. Many, many of her classmates are dead, though. Three are living here in town, but none of them are home when we call. Probably all out buying quilts and handmade duck decoys at the fair.

"Relatives," I say, typing 'Miller' into the online phone book. "Do you have her birth certificate? What was her mother's maiden name?"

Seventeen Millers pop onto the screen. I glance down at the print-out in Jim's hand. Her parents were Ephraim Miller and Helen Rostoff. There is an Ephraim Miller on the screen, listed as having a phone.

Jim makes the call. Nobody answers.

Of the other sixteen Millers, five aren't home, and the rest aren't related to Ephraim, Regina, and Helen. No Rostovs are listed for Dorset County. Or Chelan County. Or the Ellensburg area.

"Can you think of anything else, Blair?"

"Not on a Saturday."

Very slowly, Jim closes the annuals and stacks them neatly on the edge of his desk. "So."

"Yeah."

"Almost noon. Concert will be starting soon. Wanna go, Chief?"

"No . . ."
Jim nods. "Let's just... go take a look." He means Ephraim Miller, Regina's father, not the concert.

Miller's address is listed as a 'rural route delivery,' but the 911 dispatch office in Bickford has every phone number listed with a GPS location. The house we want is part of a cluster of four just off of Bear Canyon Road. They're small, wood-frame houses with little lawns that encroach only slightly on the surrounding forest. The mailbox at the end of one drive says 'Miller.' Somebody's home; the inner door is open. Jim and I park the cruiser and cross the lawn by smooth, oval stepping stones set into the grass.

The first indication I have that something is wrong is Jim's hand shoving at the center of my back. Something is very wrong, because even as Jim's weight comes crashing down against me, I hear gun shots in stereo. Just as my right hand closes on my own gun, my left arm explodes with pain that rips up through my shoulder and out through the top of my head.

It is an eternity before I can breathe, before I feel the ground under me and the weight of Jim over me. And Jim, oh God, is very still on top of me. Only the fact that he is absolutely rigid keeps me from being afraid of his stillness.

He stays still for drawn-out seconds, as every heartbeat makes my entire body throb and Jim's radio digs mercilessly into my back... and I am not certain, not quite certain, that Jim hasn't been hurt. Then his hand gently catches me at the back of my neck, even as he breathes and slides carefully away: Don't move, Chief. Stay here.

I am his back-up, dammit. I start to rise and his hand is back. "It's all right. There's no one else, I'm sure. Stay here."

He is back almost at once, putting his gun away and sliding his hands over my body.

"Jim?"

"It's all right. It's over. One thing at a time. Where does it hurt?"

"Shoulder. Arm." I speak quickly because I don't trust my voice. I'm pretty sure I haven't been shot because being shot doesn't hurt this much. I grit my teeth so Jim won't have to hear me whining and try not to move.

"Don't hold your breath. You know better than that." His hands are professional; gentle and unhesitating. He turns me neatly and sits me up. My left arm will not move at all, although the pain hasn't diminished. "Blair, I need you to relax for me."

Yeah, right. Relax.

But except for the fact that he is breathing through his mouth -- the reek of my pain has got to be overwhelming by now -- he is perfectly solid and calm. "Blair, I need you to take three deep breaths."

I obey him. Halfway through the second breath Jim shifts slightly and the pain flashes blinding and then, with a pop I can actually hear, falls away to nearly nothing. I realize I'm chanting profanities and stop.

"Dislocated shoulder," Jim whispers.

"No shit!"
"Let me see your arm." That hurts too. Damn, damn. He rolls up my sleeve and removes my watch. "It's swollen already. I can't tell if it's broken or not."

"Don't -- worry about it. 'M ok."

"Ok?"


"He met us with a rifle, Chief. Fired through the screen door."

"Fuck."

"Yeah." Jim glances up the steps toward the door. Sitting here on the ground I can't see anything but the top third of the screen door.

"Anybody else?"

"No." I realize he already told me that.

Jim tells me to stay put when I try to rise, but I ignore him and, grudgingly, he hauls me to my feet. Standing is fine. My wrist is throbbing and there is a mean ache in my shoulder, but it is nothing like it was a few minutes ago. I step away from Jim and lurch up the steps. Standing on the porch I can see two bullet holes in the screen door. On the other side, in the shadowed living room, is the body of an old, old man. I let go of my left arm and slowly open the door. There is blood everywhere and a bullet hole just below the old man's right eye.

I step back. There is no hurry to do anything, now. Behind me, Jim is calling for back-up and an ambulance and the retired doctor who works part-time as the county corner. From next door, two teen-age boys come up, asking what happened. I let Jim handle it. Distantly, I hear him ask about Miller: Did he live alone? Had he been acting strangely lately? Had there been any trouble? They say that Miller's wife died years ago and he never talked much to his neighbors. Polite and everything, but didn't get out much. Been retired for as long as either of them could remember.

I sit on the steps, half-listening. It is only now coming to me just what Jim's senses have saved us from. And his training. And his reflexes. I shudder.

Jim sends the kids away and comes to sit beside me. "You ok?"

"Mostly, yeah. Thanks, by the way. Again."

"Any time."

"So. I'm thinking that was Miller and he was, in fact, our suspect. I mean ... there's always a chance that by some weird coincidence he just... happened to pop. Today."

"He was waiting for us. He was standing against the wall beside the door."

"Well, at least -- " I stop, unwilling to find a bright side anywhere.

Jim sighs and looks upward, studying the sky. "At least we can tell Miss Lillian that her dead husband is not the prime suspect." He leans toward me slightly, smelling me.

"I'm fine."

He doesn't argue.
It is only about twenty more minutes before the help Jim called for starts to arrive. First is Millie in her battered, green Toyota station wagon. She's wearing jeans and her gray hair is a flat on one side. On her way up the lawn she picks up my hat from where it landed when I went down. "Dispatch called me in. Said you'd had some trouble."

"We were looking for someone who might know about an unreported missing person. He started shooting as soon as we got close."

Millie whistles and looks over our heads at the ruined door, then glances at me. "You hurt, Blair?"

"Landed on my arm. It's not as bad as it looks." I hope. My arm is purple from my knuckles halfway to my elbow.

Jim offers Millie the keys to the cruiser. "There's a camera in the trunk. Why don't you start getting some pictures."

"You got it."

After Millie, Joey Fanzelli pulls up. Since he was actually on duty, he's in uniform and driving one of the department cars. Just behind him are the ambulance and the little sports car driven by the coroner.

More pictures. More questions. I get up off the steps to get out of the way of the endless file of people and equipment into the house. Jim talks to everyone ... I have no idea about what. Through all the solemn, unhurried chaos he is never more than three steps from me.

I realize we are fast coming up on a dilemma: the Sheriff's department will be here for hours sorting out this mess and I might very well have a broken arm. This leaves Jim with three choices: He can keep me here with him until he and the deputies are finished, he can send me on to the hospital without him, or he can leave the scene and take me in himself. I know him. There is not one decision here he can live with. No matter what he does, he will be abandoning his duty and failing someone. Meanwhile, he must ask himself what sounds worse, having me in pain, or having me out of his sight, by his choice, while I'm hurt.

As the EMTs load Mr. Miller's body into the ambulance, I take the decision away from him. "I think I'll ride in with the ambulance, Jim. Get this looked at. How does that sound?"

His breath catches slightly. "Are you sure?" Am I sure I'll be ok without him. Am I sure I can forgive him.

I catch myself before I shrug and make due with a nod. "Sure. I'll get it over with and be done by the time you finish here. You can pick me up on your way home."

"Ok." He isn't happy, but he can live with this decision because it was mine.

I sit in the front of the ambulance with the EMTs because I don't want to sit in the back with the body. They give me a coldpack for my arm, but I don't let them mess with it; I'm going to get pawed over at the hospital, but I'm not going to get pawed over twice.

The ambulance lets me off at the emergency room before going around to the one-slot morgue at the back. Lynn is standing in the middle of the waiting room with her arms folded, staring expectantly at the doors. She starts toward me and I back away. Things are rough enough right now without Jim smelling Lynn all over me when he picks me up.

Lynn slows down when she sees me retreat. "Hey, Blair," she says softly. "You ok? How's your arm?"
"Arm?" I repeat, wondering how I'm going to get out of this.

"Jim called and said you'd hurt your arm." She is speaking slowly, like she thinks I might have a head injury or something. "Do you remember hurting your arm?" Yup. She's thinking head injury. "Did you get hurt anywhere else?"

"Well of course -- Jim called you?"

"Yes. Jim called me." She is casually circling around between me and the door. "Why don't you just go on in and have a seat on the table, ok?"

"Um. Sure." If Jim called her, he probably isn't going to be mad that she came near me. Probably.

After that it's pretty standard. They look me over and check my pupils and ask me questions about current events. Then it's mostly waiting and x-rays. The doctor goes through once, and a couple of nurses wanting blood just for the heck of it. Lynn is in and out fairly consistently, getting me a fresh icepack, chatting to help pass the time.

The only other patient is a small child, hidden by curtains and several beds away. I can hear her screaming and fighting the nurses. One of the many things I like about a small, rural hospital, is that there usually isn't a crowd in the emergency room. This one kid, though, is a crowd by herself. "What's the matter?" I ask Lynn.

"Tiny infection, BIIIIIG shot of antibiotic." She shakes her head sadly.

"Ow."

"See? This is why you shouldn't pick it."

The x-rays come back and my wrist is not broken. But it's messed up enough that I'll be in a brace and sling for about two weeks. The good news is that the pain medication starts to really kick in. By the time they are finished with me and I push open the heavy door to the waiting room I am feeling comfortable and waaaay mellow. Which is a good thing.

Simon is waiting for me. I am surprised, although I guess I shouldn't be. "Hey." I say happily. "No cast!"

"That's what the nurse said. You all done here?"

I nod. "I need to call Jim."

"I just gave him an update. He's still at the Miller place. You can call him from home."

"Home?"

"Yes. I'm taking you home." He starts to steer me for the door, showing remarkable patience, given the number of times he's had to do this or something similar. You'd think it would get old after a while.

"Hell, no. I want to go to the concert."

"The concert?"

"Well, I can't go back to work." I look down at my gun. "I probably shouldn't even be carrying." "Why don't you let me take that? We can put it away when we get home."
"Going to the concert," I say mildly.

"Home. You've got to feel lousy. And I outrank you."

A thought floats through my mind, and it's delightful. Funny. Very clever, too. "Well, actually, Simon," I say slowly, letting the thought rise, "as far as Dorset County is concerned, you're just a tourist. And, actually, I'm a duly deputized officer of the court. If you take me anywhere but the fairgrounds, I'll arrest you for interfering with an investigation."

"Oh, my God."

I smile. "That's right. You're not a cop."

He does take me to the fairgrounds. Mostly, I think, because he's so bemused he forgets what we were arguing about.

The fairground is a big, open, mostly flat field a couple miles outside of Ithaca on the opposite side of town from our house. It is surrounded on three sides by trees and the fourth by a steep and rocky hill. It is plenty large and has a good view. The only downside is the parking lot, separated by the main fairground by a thin stand of trees: it's marshy. Even after several dry weeks, our feet squish on the ground.

Thinned and flattened out a bit by the trees I hear music, "Signs Following." One of the bluegrass groups, then, although "Signs Following" wasn't originally bluegrass music. Which I hadn't known before diving in with Robyn last year, trying to find musicians who would come to the middle of nowhere. Because the chance of getting anyone I had ever heard of to come was nil. And we'd needed music.

As we clear the last line of trees, I see that everything looks perfect. Perfect. We'd done it. The stage is a long flatbed truck pulled into place at the far side of the field. Here toward the back several food concessions have been set up selling hotdogs and funnelcakes and fresh lemonade. Picnic tables run along the edge on both sides, and they are fairly crowded with people eating. A few dozen benches have been set up just in front of the concession stands, but most of the neatly trimmed grass is taken up with blankets and tarps people brought with them so they could sit on the ground.

There are so many people! The grass is veritably carpeted with families, elderly couples, young people dating. Up front, under the stage, people are dancing. Our festival is a hit.

Simon and I find an empty table about halfway up on the left. It is pushed a little out of line because the ground is uneven. The sound system doesn't cover this spot too well, but we'll be glad of that when Jim shows up. It's late afternoon and beginning to cool off. For right now, I'm just happy to sit.

"So who's singing?" Simon asks.

"'The Lewis Family and Della.' Bluegrass. Like it?" "Signs Following" is a cautionary tale about power and the abuse of authority. A minister falls into a drunken rage and kills his wife during a service. It was just the sort of song I would have adored, say, fifteen years ago when the only impact I expected to have on the world was going to come from my voice. Speak truth to power, as the Friends say. I was ready for that. Comfortable.

Look at me now, I embody authority. I wear its symbols. I carry its weapons. When I make mistakes other people pay for them, and worst of all, way worst of all is Jim. Never in my life did I expect to have as much power over anyone as I have over him. Cautionary tales about authority are for me, now.
"You ok, Sandburg?"

I manage to meet his gaze. Except for the mood swings I'm doing pretty well. I smile briefly at Simon and tell him I'm ok.

The bluegrass group finishes up, comes back for their encore. "Salty Dog" which, as far as I can tell, always sounds exactly the same no matter who is performing. It might be some kind of sorcery -- I have no other explanation. I also have no explanation for what the words mean. "They're not bad," I say.

"I've heard worse. Listen, you hungry? I could go looking for some food."

"Sure."

Simon gets up and then turns back. "Who has the best hotdogs?"

"Band Boosters. But the Chess Club lemonade should be pretty good."

"Right."

I rest my chin in my hand and sigh. It is good to sit still. When the song is over there is a short intermission while people move equipment around. I take advantage of the quiet to call Jim.

"Hey, Chief. Why do I get the feeling you're not at the house?"

"Aw, Jim. Come on. I've worked on this thing for a year. I'll go home with you."

"Blair -- "

"Think of Simon. He came out here for a good time, not to babysit."

There is a short pause while he debates the merits of arguing with me. Reason wins out: he gives up. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Waaaay fine. New heights of fine."

"Drugged out of your mind?"


A short pause, and then a gentle, "Good boy."

"What about you, Jim? You ok?"

"Me? I'm not the one who left in the ambulance."

"You had to shoot somebody today." It passes through my mind that if I weren't on pain relievers I wouldn't be quite so blunt.

"Chief, that old man opened fire on two cops from no cover. You don't do that and expect to live. I admit I'm a little pissed that if the bastard wanted to die he didn't just turn on the gas.... The number for my office was sitting on his caller ID. He knew we were coming."

An ambush. How nice.

"How're your numbers?"
A short pause. "You don't want to know."

"That's ok. It's just for a few hours. I'll be with you soon." I think about that. "I'll come to you now, if you want."

"No. No. We're almost done here. I'll come get you as soon as I can."

Simon comes back with four hotdogs, two funnelcakes, and two large lemonades. I realize that I missed lunch and have one of the hotdogs half-gone before Simon sits down.

"You know, I've heard some people actually do this thing called 'chewing,'" Simon drawls.

I grunt at him and pick up the second hotdog.

While we're eating, the next act mounts the flatbed and checks their microphones. Leoda Sue and Earl. I have to think a little to figure out where in the schedule we are. I've missed the Ukrainian folk dancers, which is disappointing, and almost all of the bluegrass, but not too much else.

"You could have told me," Simon says suddenly.

"We were just going out to question him. We had no idea everything would explode like that."

"I meant about you and Jim."

"What?" I say, because he cannot possibly be saying what it sounds like he's saying.

"What did you think I would do, disown you both? It's not like I'm in a position where knowing would even be officially inconvenient any more. I'm just a tourist in this town."

He is not looking at me, but I feel the pressure of his attention. "Simon ... it's only been a little more than a year. We don't see you all that often, so what difference did it make?" Sue and Earl are singing, but the pointed silence between is louder than the music. "I didn't see any point in making things ... awkward for you."

"Awkward for me? I signed incomplete reports for almost eleven years. Why the hell did you think I would be bothered by awkward?"

"You'd already done so much. We didn't have a right to ask for more."

"'Right' doesn't come into it. I made those decisions, and I had a 'right' to make this one."

"Ok," I say softly.

"What did you think I was going to say? You and Jim are some of the best friends I've ever had. Did you think that didn't count for anything?"

"I'm sorry, Simon."

"I would have marched for you two if you'd asked me to."

"I'm really sorry, Simon."

"Ok, then." He nods once. "Jim ... all right with this?"

"Oh. Yeah! In fact, he's -- "
"I didn't say I wanted details."

I grin. "Right."

A sigh. "Do I need to talk to Jim?"

"Not unless you want to."

"Ok, then."

He changes the subject to his upcoming grandparenthood. He's been researching strollers. Horribly expensive, but the real problem is all the choices. Did I have any idea how many features there were to choose from? He'd just get them all, but the ones with the most bells and whistles also tended to be the heaviest and least portable. It wasn't like this with Darryl, he's sure. For example, there is so much emphasis on educational toys now. But how much education do you need when you can't even lift your head? On the other hand, he doesn't want to be one of those grandfathers who spoils the kid with frivolous things. It's got to be better to spoil her with things that will help her later.

I let him go on. It's as funny as hell. I've seen him take on the mob without blinking, and this tiny not-yet-baby has him totally discombobulated.

"What are you smiling at? You think this is funny?"

"You're just so cute!"

"That better be the medication talking."

I turn around so I can lean against the table and stretch my head back. It is a lovely afternoon. The sun is warm, but a tiny breath of wind now and then keeps it from being actually hot. My arm is feeling a little stiff, and I'd like to move it, but it is tightly strapped down. All in all this is probably for the best.

And, hey! Jim will have to help me dress for at least two weeks. I manage not smile at this.

"You know," Simon says, tapping his foot in time to the music, "they're not bad." Which goes to show that you never can predict taste. I would have thought Simon was way too urban for red dirt music. He doesn't say anything else until they finish, when he grills me in detail. Like everyone else we could get, Sue and Earl are new and mostly unheard of. There isn't much to tell. But he was right, they were pretty good. It's tamer than the live music I used to go listen to in Cascade, but live music of any kind has a sort of magic. Up toward the front, just under the stage, a couple dozen people had been dancing. If I weren't wearing this sling (and, come to think of it, this uniform which tends to put the kibosh on wild abandon), I probably would have joined them.

"I guess they don't have a CD or anything," he says.

"Well, yeah, actually. One. There should be a sale table around here somewhere."

"Really? Would you be all right for a while if I, um, -- ?"

"Yeah, sure. Go. It's probably down that way."

The next singer is already coming up, a single woman with a guitar, but that could be a couple of acts. I'm not at a good angle to see her face and I can't remember who's next. Never mind, the music will be good. I made all the important decisions, after all. I stretch out my legs and sigh. It would be a lot nicer if Jim were here.
"Hello, Blair."

My head snaps up. I hadn't heard anybody approach, but Miss Lillian is standing over me. "Hi." I pat the bench next to me with my right hand.

She sits down heavily. "I'm sorry, Blair. It never occurred to me that you'd be hurt pursuing this."

I try to smile. "What, do you have spies everywhere?"

"Over a thousand children passed through my classroom and almost a third still live here in town. What do you think?" But her own smile doesn't make it to her eyes.

"Miss Lillian... I don't know what anybody could have done differently that would have made it turn out better. I really don't."

"I told myself I was only being a law-abiding citizen. That the truth was a worthy objective even if it was terrible."

"There's a lot to be said for that," I say, carefully.

"Bull." The choice of words startles me. "I wasn't being noble. I was being petty and angry and faithless."

"You were in a terrible position. The evidence said Vernon might have -- You were upset by what it might have meant. I really hope I'm being tactful here.

She turns sharply, fixing me with hard eyes. "Not by what it might have meant. I knew better than that, or should have. I was upset by what it did mean. When I read that note, I was hurt. And then I acted unwisely; either one of you boys might have been killed because of what I'd told you. Somehow, petty revenge against the dead for an indiscretion that happened over fifty years ago doesn't seem worth that."

"If you hadn't done it we might never have found out who Regina was. Her murderer would still be out there."

"Now he is dead, Regina is still dead, and you've been injured. Is that an improvement?"

"It is better, though. The alternative is terrible things happening to people and nobody caring or trying to do anything about it. Maybe you were angry when you told us what you knew, but you would have told us even if you hadn't been. You didn't let being angry stop you any more than you let being ashamed."

She doesn't answer, and I worry that I've gone too far, but she doesn't leave either. Suddenly I stand up and hold out my good hand. "Dance with me."

"You're injured!"

"You'll have to take it easy on me, then." She softens a bit and stands up.

Miss Lillian dances just like she does everything else: correctly and gracefully. Which is saying a lot when you consider that her partner couldn't get his left hand into the proper position to lead and the song is a cover of Dar Williams' "Great Unknown" which is hard to dance to. It was the right suggestion to make, though. Talking any more would have been painful, sending her away without peace between us would have been the end of our friendship.
The illusion of correctness ends when she stops suddenly and I nearly trip over her feet. It is Jim's hand that reaches out and steadies me.

Oh, shit.

I step away from her quickly, trying not to look guilty. Jim and I have never danced, but that doesn't mean he won't feel abandoned if I dance with someone else. The only defense I have is that my partner is old enough to be my grandmother.

"Miss Lillian."

"Sheriff."

Jim clears his throat.

"I'm very sorry about what happened," she says.

"It wasn't your fault. And we were grateful for the help you provided. We'll get your things back to you as soon as I can. All of them."

"Won't you need ... some of it ... for evidence?"

"Against whom? And even if there were going to be a trial...the county prosecutor couldn't go to court with just our inferences about that letter."

"Inferences."

"It's not proof of anything."

She tries to smile; even though it is plain that she disagrees, she is going to accept this gracefully and with gratitude. "I see. Thank you."

She shakes his hand and makes her exit. Suddenly, although there are a couple of thousand people around us, Jim and I are alone. He turns to me.

"So how's the case?" I ask quickly.

He sits down with his back to the table in the seat I'd just abandoned. "We got a ballistics sample from the rifle. We're sending it off to the lab but to me it looks the same."

"The same as what?"

"The one Hikiro found in the mud under our remains. Of course, I'm no expert. But it looked the same to me."

"Damn."

"Yeah."

"So, that's it, then?"

"Probably."

I sit down beside him and we just stay still for a few minutes, leaning back, maybe listening to the music, maybe not.
"So, how's the arm?"

"Desk duty for a while. No sweat, really."

A stiff, unhappy nod. Without looking at me, he reaches out and feathers his hand over my shoulder. I think he's going to say something, but he just sighs. He wants to touch me properly -- and I need him to. But we're in public, on the edge, but in full sight of everyone. Coming here was a mistake. I am so tired, and he is so tense and small. We should be home, where I could hold him and he could hold me. We should be home.

"What can you smell?" I say, because I have asked him that so many hundreds of times.

"Old sweat. Pain meds. You had a lemonade."

"You can get all that?" I've said that hundreds of times, too.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, remembering that he doesn't have to touch me to submerge himself in me. I move my shoe, just a little, so that it brushes against the side of his. This tiny contact is tremendously reassuring, and I close my eyes, too.

It's cooler, now. The sun is well caught in the trees, casting everything in deep shade. Beside me, Jim is solid and warm. He's doing his breathing. It isn't just that I can hear him. I can feel him, sort of, in my stomach. Or maybe in my heart. I give myself over to his warmth, his calm, the soft wind and the music.

I can recognize the singer, now. Aletta Muncie. She's really good for someone who was a particle physicist until a year and a half ago. Really good. Although the songs are a bit depressing; good, old-fashioned folk music themes like mine accidents and ship wrecks and labor violence. Classic stuff. Mom would love it.

The bench shifts slightly, and I open my eyes. Simon is sitting on the other side of Jim, his hands full of CDs and a tray of food. "Autographed!" he says proudly. But his eyes slide to Jim and then to me, asking me if everything is all right.

I smile tiredly and ask, "Any of that grub for us?"

It's bratwurst this time, and more lemonade. More funnelcake. I tell myself that we don't eat like this often. A few people drop by to congratulate us on the case or the festival or both. Commissioner Chang, Robyn Hurley, Brittany from the diner. Jim is polite to everyone.

The singer finishes, the next one mounts the flatbed. The sun goes entirely down and the portable lights come on. People eat and dance, and small children start to curl up and fall asleep on the picnic blankets. "Wanna go home?" I ask. Jim opens his eyes and looks out over the crowd for a moment. "Yeah."

"Is it all right? Are we covered?"

"Millie's got it."

Simon offers to come with us but he's having a good time and rather obviously wants to give us some privacy, so it isn't hard to 'convince' him to stay. I follow Jim around the edge of the field to the opening through the trees that leads to the parking lot. Once the food vendors are behind us it's pretty dark, and he slides an arm around my waist. Partly to keep me from straying off the path. I lean against him with my good shoulder, partly because I'm tired.
At home we pause in the living room to put away my gun which Jim took from Simon. Then we stop in the kitchen for a glass of water to go with my pain pill and to turn on the lights. At long last we are in the bedroom and Jim is gently untangling me from the strap and the sling. "You want a shower, Chief?"

"Yeah. Ok."

"You don't have to." He pauses, letting one hand rest at the back of my neck. "It's ok."

"Oh. No shower." I reach to help him unbutton my shirt, but he brushes my hand away. "Bathroom, though." I am tired but fairly clear-headed. I go to the bathroom by myself, remembering to leave the hall light on for Simon.

When I come back, Jim settles me in the bed before undressing himself and climbing in after me. His own gun goes onto the nightstand beside him. There are still times, I think, when he would rather have it under the pillow, but that is not going to happen while we are in the same bed. He turns out the light and pulls down the sheet to examine my shoulder and arm with the tips of his fingers.

"Blair, I am really sorry --"

"Blair." But what can he say that both of us haven't already said dozens of times? "Was Lynn there?"

"Uh, wait. Good?"

"I wanted you taken care of."

"Oh. Well. Good, then." I relax and pull the covers up. "Good. And you're, um, ok with me dancing with Miss Lillian?"

"Chief! She's almost seventy. Do you think I'm that messed up, that I'd be jealous of an old lady?"

"Right. Sorry." I sigh. "I just . . . sometimes I don't deal real well when you don't trust me."

"No. No, this isn't about that." He has started to pull away, and I reach out clumsily to stop him. "It's about... why I'm doing such a rotten job figuring this out. If I could think about this clearly ... I mean, maybe it's not you. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm doing something that's pushing your buttons. Or maybe I'm not looking at it the right way. Maybe it's me."

"A soft sigh, a single finger stroking my beard. "This is about that table leg comment, isn't it? You're gonna make me pay for that for the rest of my life, right? Blair, look -- " He's trying to avoid the issue, dodging things that might be painful or hurtful."

"No, wait, hear me out. Maybe the issue isn't about me being, well, easy. Or about other people encroaching on your territory. Maybe it's about the fact that until you I never committed to anyone I was with. Even when I loved them. Maybe it's my ability to commit that has you worried."

"No," Jim says. "Even when you were flighty, you were committed. You may not have committed
to any person, but you were making commitments. And you were taking them seriously. Alternately working your ass off and risking your life, if I remember correctly."

I try again, "I committed to a person. I committed to you. But not to someone I was, you know, sleeping with." Oh, God. Life is too short to be bullshitting around with denial and hurting Jim. If this is my fault, I'm not going to dance around it. "Maybe it's perfectly reasonable for someone to wonder if I have that kind of stability."

He is shaking his head. "If all we had was sex, damn right I'd have something to worry about. But I do know you are committed to me, so I don't see how I can blame this on you. The thing is, I don't know what you could do differently that would make me feel any better about it."

The old 'it's not you it's me' explanation. In this case, it's probably true. It's certainly the one I've come up with most often. But we've covered this ground before, and it hasn't done a lot of good. "So, if these feelings you're having aren't coming from something I've done, where are they coming from?"

"Well, if it's not you, it has to be me. I guess they're coming from me. They're mine."

I reach across with my good arm and take his hand. He probably needs me to say something really profound and illuminating right now, and I just don't seem to have it in me.

"They are coming from me. So they aren't your fault, and you can't do anything about them. They aren't real."

Whoops. I can't let that slide. "They are real feelings. They just aren't based on what's happening right now, out here in the world."

He takes a couple of deep breaths. "Blair, what if I can't make them go away?"

I don't know. I don't know how to make him stop feeling threatened. I've been working on this for months. Nothing I have done, nothing I have said has made any difference. What will we do if nothing changes? "Then we'll live with them. Just like we've been doing. You'll do your best. I'll do my best. We'll talk. We'll work it out."

There is a short silence. I suppose Jim was waiting for a better answer than that. It's what I do, isn't it? Figure him out? Process? Fix everything? I am drawing breath to assure him that tomorrow will be better, that I'll figure it out, that he can beat this thing when he says, "What if . . . what if it's ten years from now and I'm still freaking out when the office staff whisper about your butt?"

For some reason I can't put my finger on he sounds very hopeful and I feel vastly reassured. "Then I will be a middle-aged man who is very proud of his butt and you'll be an elderly man whispering to himself, 'it's just a feeling.' How does that sound? Can you live with that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I can live with that." He turns toward me, reaches for my hair. "It's just a feeling. I'm not losing you."

"Damn right," I whisper.

"You don't want to be anywhere else. Nobody is going to take you away from me. It's just a feeling."

"And, man, you are way stronger than that feeling!" He may beat this after all. But even if he doesn't, I'll keep my promise. For Jim I can live with an occasional panicked freaking out, as long he remembers to keep fighting it.
He leans down and kisses me. His lips are sweet and reverent and undemanding. It must be true love -- I smell pretty awful at this point, especially to him. I manage to kiss him back for a moment before falling asleep. Not the most romantic ending to the day, but I'll take it.

End First Annual Dorset County Folk Music Festival by Dasha: soulcake@bellsouth.net

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