The Observer

by Bluewolf458

Summary

Contracted to write a book about the work of the PD for the Police Academy, Dr Blair Sandburg is assigned to ride along with a reluctant Det. Ellison

Notes

This is a mildly slash version. A gen version is also available.

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by Bluewolf

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Not mine, just letting them have some fun. Anything directly quoted from an episode is not intended to breach anyone's copyright.
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THE OBSERVER

by Bluewolf

Nobody in the bullpen paid much attention to the young man who entered, glanced briefly around, then walked briskly to Simon Banks' office and knocked.
"Come in!"

The visitor opened the door, went in, and closed it behind him.

Some ten minutes later, Banks bellowed, "Ellison! My office, now!"

Jim Ellison put down the folder he was studying with what might have been called a sigh of relief if it had come from anyone else in Major Crime, but which, coming from Ellison, everyone else in the bullpen had no hesitation in describing as a bad-tempered growl.

He strode over to stand in the doorway, glowering at Banks and paying no attention whatsoever to the young man sitting in front of the desk sipping coffee. "What is it, Cap? I'm busy!"

"Not busy enough to have made any headway in the Frasier case!" Banks snapped. "I'm pulling you off it; the trail's cold now anyway. Come right in and close the door." As Ellison obeyed, Banks indicated his visitor. "This is Dr Blair Sandburg from Rainier University."

The visitor was looking round, smiling politely; Ellison barely glanced at the man as Banks went on, "It's been decided that the Police Academy needs some new, up-to-date training material on the work the police do, citing specific cases and how the clues have been put together, and Dr Sandburg has been contracted to write it. You're the only detective in Major Crime who doesn't have a regular partner - he'll ride along with you until he has most of the material he needs."

"What?" This time, Ellison took a good look at Dr Sandburg, registering the ponytail and ear-rings and seeing what looked like a chain round the man's neck. "Cap, how the hell am I supposed to do my job if I'm babysitting some long-haired, jewelry-wearing neo-hippy punk?"

"The same way Jack Pendergrast did his job when he was partnered with a certain foul-tempered bastard who came here from Vice!" Banks snapped.

The young man put down his cup and swung right round in his chair; he gave no indication of being intimidated by the scowling detective standing over him. "You don't have to like me, Detective Ellison, just as I don't have to like you. But I've been given a job to do and I mean to do it properly. If that means riding along with a guy with attitude, I'll do it. You might as well get used to the idea."

Banks nodded. "Sandburg's right, Ellison. You might as well get used to the idea."

Ellison's scowl deepened. "At least Pendergrast didn't have to partner someone just out of school!"

Sandburg grinned. "Just out of school, huh? How old do you think I am?" he challenged.

"If you're at Rainier you have to be twenty, twenty-one - "

"You're forgetting the 'Doctor'; you can add ten years to that," Sandburg told him. "I got my doctorate in anthropology three years ago."

Ellison muttered something, of which only the word 'academic' was audible, and Sandburg's grin widened. Somehow that infuriated Ellison even more, but before he could say anything else, Banks intervened.

"Turn over most of your caseload to Rawlings and Cooper; you can spend an hour or so bringing them up to date on everything. Sandburg will sit in - as of now, he's your new partner. Keep the arson case."
Ellison glared from one to the other.

"Think of it this way," Banks said. "It's a direct order from Chief Warren that Sandburg works with somebody in Major Crime; I've chosen you to be that somebody, partly because you don't have a partner, partly because you're good at what you do. But if Sandburg has to come to me, complaining that you're not giving him full co-operation, you'll be out of this department and back to Vice so fast you won't need to open any doors on the way - you'll go right through them. And even then you might find yourself working with him again, because he'll need to do a few days in Vice - and Narcotics - and Homicide - though mostly he'll be here."

"All right, sir. I know how to obey orders."

Banks ignored the insult in the heavily accented 'sir'. "Oh, and Ellison - the spirit of the orders, not just the letter of them."

"Yes, sir."

Sandburg rose. "Thanks for the coffee, Captain. I'm sure Detective Ellison and I can work something out."

He picked up the backpack that had been lying at his feet and followed Ellison to his desk; the detective gathered several folders together, glowered at Sandburg, and snarled, "Over here."

Ellison dumped the folders he was carrying in front of the man sitting there. "Banks says you've to take over these cases."

"Ouch! Sandburg thought. I see what Simon meant about this guy. He sure doesn't set out to make himself popular!"

"I've been given another job - not that it's any of your business." Ellison's voice couldn't have held more contempt if he'd tried for the next fifty years. He didn't bother to introduce his new 'partner'. "Now the Frasier murder - " he pushed over one folder - "is the most recent case, and I've linked it to two other killings - the MO is exactly the same - but the trail's gone cold; I think the killer's left Cascade." He pushed over another folder. "I'm certain the bank heist was an inside job. I think it's one of the security guards. We just have to work out which one it is." He pushed over a third folder. "This one's a dead end. A missing person. No indication of foul play; I think she's just a runaway, and since she's a twenty-eight-year-old adult I assume she's chosen this way of walking out of an unsatisfactory marriage."

"Or it could be a man who's killed his wife and reported her missing," the other detective growled.

"It's possible, Rawlings, it's possible." There was mockery in his voice. "If you do follow it up, don't expect any useful information from Lorimer; the man's a fool, but he has an unbreakable alibi. If his wife has walked, it's probably the most sensible thing she's done since she met him. But if you want to waste your time investigating him - it's your time to waste." He swung round. "Are you coming, Sandburg?"

"Ellison, Captain Banks said to go over these cases with Detective Rawlings. Just telling him what
they are is hardly going over them," Sandburg pointed out. Although Ellison was the one he'd be working with, it wouldn't hurt, he knew, to be on reasonably amicable terms with everyone else.

"These reports are up to date. They're detectives. If they can't work things out by reading the reports they don't deserve the name." He turned and headed for the door.

Sandburg glanced at Rawlings, shrugged, mouthed, "Sorry!" and followed Ellison.

"Where are you parked?" Ellison asked as they took the elevator to the garage. He was reluctantly aware that his ride-along's car would have to be allotted a space in the garage, and he would probably have to see to it.

"I'm not," Sandburg said. "I came here by bus. I don't have a car."

"Do you even drive?"

"Oh, yes," Sandburg said, airily dismissive. "I got rid of my last car three years ago, just after I got my doctorate - I've been abroad thirty months out of the thirty-six and I expect to go abroad again after I finish this book. Under those circumstances, my having a car would be rather a waste, don't you think?"

Ellison grunted. "I start work at eight tomorrow - think you can get here by then?" His voice said he doubted Sandburg would even be awake.

"Oh, I think so," Sandburg said cheerfully, having decided that ignoring the man's attitude, while making sure his own actions could not actually be faulted, would probably anger the detective even more - and being perfectly happy to do whatever he could to infuriate him.

He followed Ellison to an elderly blue and white truck. He put his backpack on the floor at his feet and fastened his seat belt with an exaggerated care that he knew was a subtle criticism of the man's driving, and mentally grinned at the tightened jaw. Yes, Ellison undoubtedly prided himself on his driving skill.

Justifiable pride, he admitted to himself a few minutes later. And the truck undoubtedly had a better engine than anyone looking at it might think - yes, it was probably a good vehicle for a cop to drive. No criminal would expect it to be capable of reaching the speed limit, let alone produce the kind of speed it might need for a chase. He made a mental note for his book. He'd be taking notes as he went along, of course, but damned if he was going to look as if he was trying to butter up Detective Ellison!

The truck swung into the parking lot beside Gershwin's Furniture Warehouse.

Sandburg glanced at Ellison, his raised eyebrows clearly asking why they were there. "Couple of nights ago, Gershwin's storage warehouse burned down," Ellison growled. "A storeman died - at least, we think he did. No body, but he hasn't been seen since he started his shift."

"You're not considering it possible that he started the fire and then ran for it?" Sandburg asked.

Ellison shook his head. "His car was still in the lot the next morning," he said grimly.

"It would have to be a pretty hot fire to destroy a body."

"The fire chief said it had to be burning at around 5000 degrees, hot enough to melt the concrete on the floor into glass. Well, are you coming?" He jumped to the ground.
Sandburg followed, thinking that when the other man lost his attitude, however briefly, he was really quite likeable. However, he decided, best to assume he shows attitude ninety nine percent of the time.

They had only taken a few steps when Ellison stopped. "Damn!"

Sandburg glanced at him. Yes, the moment was indeed brief. "Problem?" he asked, careful not to sound as if it mattered to him.

"Not really." He indicated the woman who was walking briskly on an intercept course. "Debra Reeves - she's an arson investigator. Has all the tact of a charging rhino."

*Oof!* Sandburg thought. *Coming from you, that's damning indeed."

"Hello, Ellison," she said, her voice falsely sweet. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Dr Sandburg. He's riding along with me for a few weeks."

"Oh, you poor thing!" Sandburg hadn't thought it possible for her to could get a more saccharine note in her voice, but she did; and he realized he had no idea which of them she was 'sympathising' with.

"I'm quite looking forward to it," he said, cheerfully assuming that she was talking to him. "As an anthropologist, I know plenty about many different cultures, both past and present, especially small tribal ones, but I realize I'm sadly ignorant about certain aspects of our own modern way of life. Captain Banks assures me I'll learn a lot from Detective Ellison."

He knew instantly that he had been right; her comment had been a dig at Ellison, and she wouldn't love him for blunting the knife - but for a brief, brief moment he had seen something in Ellison that he - well, didn't dislike. He hesitated to say 'something he liked', for he was fairly sure he and Ellison did not and never would have anything in common.

"I take it you're here to have a word with Mr Gershwin?" Ellison asked, his voice falsely polite.

"I take it so are you," she replied, an equally insincere note in her voice.

Sandburg dropped a pace behind as they entered the store. Inside, all three stopped, looking round. An assistant came over to them. "Are you looking for anything in particular, sir?"

It was Reeves who answered, and Sandburg decided that if this had been happening in a comic, her words would have had icicles hanging from every letter.

"We'd like a word with Mr Gershwin about the fire in your storage warehouse. Inspector Reeves, arson investigator, and Detective Ellison, Major Crime."

"Yes, ma'am. Er, Inspector."

The assistant hurried away, disappearing through a door that was discreetly hidden by a curtain; as minute or two later, an elderly man came out and crossed to them. "Are you looking for anything in particular, sir?"

"Have you any word on what caused the fire?" he asked. He looked soft, and sounded relatively ineffectual, Sandburg decided, but it was unlikely that he was either.

"Not yet, but it was an unusually hot fire," Ellison said as he flashed his ID, and Sandburg noted that the man's people skills were better than he might have expected. "You didn't have any highly
flammable material stored there by any chance?"

"Detective, for years I've made a point of only stocking fire-retardant furniture - yes, it's dearer than some of the plastic and polyester furniture you'll get in a lot of stores, but it's what the discerning customer wants. So I realize it had to be a fierce fire. The loss... "

"Mr Gershwin, you stand to get an insurance payment of two million dollars, so you can hardly speak of 'loss'," Reeves cut in. "Now I'm wondering - you've increased your fire cover twice in the last year."

"Well, yes - there was that bad fire just three blocks from here. It made me think quite hard about the amount of fire cover I had. I'm not the only one to have taken a lesson from it and increase my cover."

"You increased your cover quite significantly at a time when your business was actually losing money - am I correct? I understand you lost roughly half a million dollars in the first half of this year."

"Inspector, any business is cyclical. Our sales have increased significantly in the last three months, and if things carry on like that, we'll end the year on a modest profit. Of course, that's supposing we can replace everything that was lost in the fire reasonably quickly - some of what was lost had already been bought and was awaiting pickup for delivery. I'll have to compensate the buyers for their inconvenience, if I have to wait more than a day or two for the manufacturers to replace these items. Of course, the insurance money will help to cover that."

Reeves glared at him. "Mr Gershwin, are you aware that arson for profit is a serious offence?"

"Arson... Are you accusing me of... of... " He was spluttering in indignation.

"And a man died," Reeves continued. "Which automatically adds murder to the crime. If you were responsible for setting that fire, Mr Gershwin, I suggest you come clean now, while it's still possible to cut a deal."

He spluttered again. "This is unbelievable. You come into my store and accuse me of... of... "

"Mr Gershwin, we have to look at every angle," Ellison said quietly, and Sandburg was sure it galled him to be playing good cop to the woman's bad cop.

"I've had enough. Get out of my store! When you find out what, or who, burned it down you can send someone else to let me know, but I don't want to see either of you on my premises again!"

"Very well, sir." Ellison turned to leave. Reeves glared at Gershwin, but also turned to go, and as Sandburg followed, he was aware of Gershwin looking at him, obviously wondering just who he was, especially since he hadn't opened his mouth once.

He grinned amiably. "Nice meeting you, sir." Then he walked out, catching up with the other two just outside the door.

"Don't you think you were jumping the gun a bit with that felony accusation?" Ellison was saying.

"Have you any idea how many businesses have a convenient fire when their losses hit a certain point?" she demanded.

"Hey, guys, guys! Gershwin's right, all business is cyclical." Sandburg tried to inject a modicum of common sense into the argument. "Back in the nineteenth century, the textile industry had a
roughly ten year cycle of boom and bust. Shipbuilding had a cycle that was nearer fifty or sixty years. Hard on everyone in the bust years, but things always improved. Big businesses allow for that."

"This is today!" Reeves snapped. "In the nineteenth century employers could sack their entire workforce and nobody cared. Today the unions would scream blue murder. And wh ye ever you're riding with Ellison, you're not an arson investigator. Do you know the percentage of suspicious fires in the last year we've been able to prove were arson? Nearly half of them. Most of those were businesses, though one or two were domestic. We were able to prove owner responsibility in a lot of those cases." She sighed, becoming just a little more human. "The one thing that makes this one slightly doubtful is the length of time since Gershwin increased his insurance cover. Mostly the fire comes within four or five weeks of the cover being increased. Gershwin increased his the first time ten months ago, then again a couple of months later, after the fire he mentioned. It was arson, though that one wasn't by the owner, it was an ex-employee with a grudge.

"Basically, though, what makes this fire so suspicious was the heat of the thing."

Sandburg looked from her to Ellison, who was nodding reluctant agreement. "I'd agree I wouldn't have pegged Gershwin as having enough sense as wait for eight months, which is why I think practically accusing the man was a mistake."

"Getting them off-balance is one of the best ways of getting them to slip up." She glared at him. "And don't tell me you don't do the same thing." She turned abruptly and strode away.

Ellison watched her for a moment in silence then headed for his truck; Sandburg followed.

Once in the truck, Sandburg fastened his seat belt then pulled a small notebook from his pack and began to scribble in it.

"What are you doing?" The tone was accusing rather than curious.

"In case you've forgotten, this ride-along is so I can write a book. I want to get a note of that little interview down while it's still fresh in my mind - I think even you would agree it was probably a perfect example of how not to question someone?"

"Even I would agree?"

"Detective, even if Captain Banks hadn't warned me about your general attitude, I've already seen it for myself - the way you spoke to Detective Rawlings, for example. But you can't deny you told Inspector Reeves she was a bit premature, practically accusing Gershwin of burning down his own building."

Ellison was silent for a moment, then he said quietly and surprisingly reasonably, "Actually, I think she's right, though it's true I'm surprised he waited as long as eight months from raising his insurance. However, I'm quite sure he doesn't have the know-how to do it, not the way it burned; if he did it himself he'd have been completely unimaginative, used a couple of cans of gas, same as the fire eight months ago, and the damage would have been extensive, more obviously arson, but the fire wouldn't have been as hot as it was. He employed someone who knows fire. Our problem is catching that someone. Yes, I want to get Gershwin on what is basically an insurance scam, but that's a low priority against catching the guy he employed. When I was given this case, I checked for other warehouse fires that were reported as 'very hot'. This is the fifth one within a fifty mile radius of Cascade in the last two years, and the third where someone died."

"So why couldn't you tell her that? I mean, it's obvious you don't like each other, but you're on the
same side here; you both want to stop this guy."

"I want to stop the arsonist, and while I want to see the guy who employed him charged as well, as far as I'm concerned that's a lower priority. Once it's proved it's arson, the insurance company might pay out, but he'll find it virtually impossible to get further cover from any insurance company; he's given himself a short-term solution to a financial problem, but long-term? The next time he has a problem, he's bankrupt. Reeves, though - she wants to stop the arsonist, but basically she'll be satisfied if the guy who employed him is hauled through the court and ruined, hoping that all the other businessmen who might see burning down their own property as a short-term solution to anything realize it's not a good idea, and that without customers the arsonist will... well, go away."

"But he's not likely to, is he? Serial criminals are ones who enjoy whatever it is they do."

Ellison nodded. "Even if we make businessmen here think twice, all he has to do is move away - maybe shift his operation to the east coast for a while."

Sandburg scribbled a few more notes, then taking advantage of Ellison's momentary approachability, said, "Someone who knows fire. It occurs to me that the people who know most about fire are the ones who work with it. Like firemen."

"I wouldn't have thought you the cynical kind," Ellison commented.

"I'm an anthropologist," Sandburg said quietly, "with a minor in psychology. We observe people. You'd be surprised at some of the things I've seen."

Ellison grunted, then without saying anything more he started the truck. "Where do you want dropped off?" The ungracious note was back in his voice.

Sandburg glanced at his watch. "Anywhere I can get a bus to Rainier." The one thing he was sure of was that Ellison would not offer to drive him there.

Oh, well, the more human attitude was nice while it lasted, Sandburg thought, but he wouldn't expect to be the recipient of that very often. Pity, though - he had begun to realize that when he laid aside the attitude, Ellison actually seemed the sort of guy he could like.

Ellison did indeed drop Sandburg off at a bus stop, then drove off, saying, "Remember - I start at eight. If you're late, I might not be there." He was, however, pleasantly surprised that his ride-along hadn't asked to be taken to Rainier.

As he pulled into his usual parking place at 852 Prospect, he suddenly realized that for the first time in weeks he had lost the steady, throbbing headache that had been responsible for so much of his bad temper recently; thinking back over the day's events, he realized that it had begun to fade while he was driving to Gershwin's Furniture Warehouse.

Unwilling to admit that there might be anything serious wrong with him, he had been ignoring the headaches as best he could, though he had begun to fear that soon he would have to see a doctor about them. Now, he decided, it was obvious that whatever had caused them wasn't anything serious or the ache wouldn't have gone away on its own. Maybe he'd just been overworking. Maybe it was sheer relief that he was no longer working on the Frasier case, which had certainly been frustrating enough to give him a headache!

Whatever the cause, it was also the first time in weeks he had actually felt hungry, and instead of settling for the undemanding cheese sandwich that had been his mainstay for altogether too long,
eaten only because he knew he must eat, he retrieved some chicken and vegetables from the freezer, put rice on to boil, and before long was sitting down to, and thoroughly enjoying, a stir fry. Then, instead of going straight to bed to try to sleep off the headache - he had discovered early on that aspirin did not help it - he settled down in front of the television.

Sandburg, who was based at Rainier although he had spent only six months there in the previous three years, was expected to guest lecture when he was in Cascade; Rainier took the view that while he was going off on expeditions and writing them up, it wanted the books Sandburg wrote to be by 'Dr Sandburg, Rainier University', and paid him a surprisingly generous fee for his lectures in order to keep him there. His first book, *Do Sentinels Still Exist?* had taken the academic world by storm, being a very readable account of sentinels, their purpose, and the reasons why it was unlikely for anyone in modern life to develop five heightened senses, while going into detail about the use heightened taste and smell were in certain careers. Burton's book had been virtually forgotten for close on a century; Sandburg's had revived an interest in the subject among anthropologists.

It had been the subject he had originally hoped would provide his thesis, but he had finally been forced to the realisation that he would never find anyone with more than two heightened senses, so had turned his research into a book, while writing his thesis on the social structure in semi-closed societies, such as institutions or prisons, where there was a constantly changing population - having spent several months at Conover as a volunteer helper in order to study the patients and two weeks at Starkville. He still had the occasional nightmare about Warren Chapel, the cold-blooded killer of three high-profile criminals who, when tried after the second one, had walked free on technicalities. Re-arrested after the third death, he had been committed to Conover. What made Chapel so terrifying was his quiet certainty that what he had done was right - the papers at the time had certainly agreed that the men he killed had deserved it and the relatives of their victims wanted to give him a medal. Three psychiatrists had, independently of each other, declared him completely amoral, saying that in their opinion 'justice' had not figured in his decision to kill these men; he had wanted to kill, had chosen victims who, he believed, would not be missed by society, probably in the hope that if he was caught no jury would convict him, but there was no guarantee that he would not one day kill a genuinely innocent person.

Sandburg was still not certain whether the psychiatrists were right or whether Chapel genuinely saw himself as the 'avenging angel' some of the papers had called him.

He had never lost his interest in sentinels, and still questioned the tribes he visited about them, but the nearest he had come to finding one had been three years previously, when he spent time with the Chopek in Peru. He had overheard two of the older children talking about 'Enqueri', and from what they said to each other, he had wondered - but the adults, when questioned, told him that Enqueri had left them long ago.

Of course, 'long ago' was a very subjective period, and to a member of a hunter-gatherer tribe could be anything from five years through fifty to five hundred. The shaman Incacha had been particularly ambiguous in his comments, and after speaking with Incacha, Sandburg had stopped asking.

He reached Rainier about half an hour before the lecture was due to start, and went straight to the lecture hall - he was there so seldom he had refused the offer of office space - and sat at the lectern looking over his notes while he waited for his class to assemble. It was, as always, an open lecture; as well as the anthropology students who were expected to attend, anyone with any connection to the university was free to sit in, and the hall was already filling.
It was quite flattering - although he had no intention of letting it go to his head.

"Hello, Blair - how did you get on with Ellison?"

He glanced up and grinned a welcome at the tall police Captain. "Hi, Simon. Not too bad, actually. I don't dislike the man - when he drops the attitude he's quite human. Though... Have you any idea what the score is between him and Inspector Reeves?"

"Don't tell me - she's on this arson case too?"

"We met her at Gershwin's store. You could practically see the knives."

Banks sighed. "Ellison was married to a woman in Technical Support. It didn't last long - Carolyn walked out, said nobody could live with the man - and Ellison took up with Reeves, more or less on the rebound. That didn't last long either, but their split was far more acrimonious, though nobody knows why."

"Classic case of love turned to hate, huh?"

"You could say that, though seriously I don't think Ellison has it in him to love anyone. The only person I know who ever seemed to get through to him was Jack Pendergrast. When Ellison transferred to Major Crime from Vice, I partnered him with Jack - a few years older, more experience, far more easy-going - and it paid off. But then Jack disappeared along with a million dollars he was supposed to be handing over in a ransom case. The kidnap victim was never found, and the kidnappers vanished, too - they were never heard from again. IA decided that Jack had killed them all and taken off with the cash."

"It's just as likely that the kidnappers took the money and killed the guy who was handing it over as well as the victim."

"That was more or less what Ellison said. He was under suspicion for a while, because he'd just bought the place he was renting, but he was able to prove the money was a combination of back pay from his army days and what he'd saved while he was in the army - I don't know all the details, but he was reported MIA, believed dead. Turned up a year and a half later when the army finally got round to sending out someone to check up on them. His men had been killed, right enough, when their helicopter crashed, but he'd survived and carried out his mission. There was a bit about him in News magazine when he was rescued, but a lot of it was journalese padding - you know the sort of thing."

Blair thought for a moment. "He's James J Ellison?"

"Yeah."

"You're right, a lot of it was a reporter making up the facts he didn't have; I could have done a more convincing job when I was still an ignorant freshman. One thing I did get, though, reading between the lines; he'd expected search and rescue to arrive long before they did, and was bitter that his group had just been written off. It was one of the few places that sounded as if the words had come from him. He was too... too formally polite, too uncritical about it."

"You know, Blair, that's one of the ways you always surprise me - the memory you have for things you read years ago."

"It needs a trigger, though. I'd completely forgotten about all that until you mentioned it." He glanced at his watch. "I suppose Daryl's keeping a seat for you? The lecture starts in a couple of minutes."
Banks nodded. "Want to come back with us for a meal, afterwards?"

"Thanks, Simon." He watched Banks as he made his way to a seat about the middle of the well-filled hall, grateful for the big cop's friendship. They had originally met four years earlier, while Blair was still a TA at Rainier; Simon's son Daryl had been a student in Anthro 101, reacting badly to his parents' divorce, and Blair had taken the time to talk with him over a period of several months, finally getting him to understand that it wasn't his fault, that both parents still loved him, and that this was something that had happened to plenty of other people.

Then he stood, and began.

"Good evening. My subject this evening..."

Simon and Daryl Banks moved forward against the stream of traffic when the lecture ended, to join Blair, who was gathering his notes together to put carefully in his pack while he waited on the dais for his audience to clear. He was quietly satisfied with the evening; the lecture had been well received, and he had noticed the Chancellor sitting at the back, possibly checking that he wasn't coasting on a reputation for giving interesting lectures which he knew, without false modesty, was fully justified.

Now he grinned a welcome at his friends. "Hello, Daryl. How's it going?"

"Great. Blair, can I come with you on your next expedition?"

"Well, I don't deny I'd be glad to have you along," Blair said, "but I won't be going off again for a while. I expect to be in Cascade for at least a year this time. If you get the chance to go off on an expedition before that, don't turn it down."

"Oh. Will you be taking a steady class while you're here?"

Blair shook his head. "No, the university has its complement of full-time staff. I didn't know I was to be here for so long till a few days ago. I'm writing a book for the police academy."

"Cool! But... does that mean it won't be for sale to the public?"

"That's right."

"But... but everyone looks forward to your next book!"

"Oh, I think I can probably come up with another travel or anthropology book as well," Blair laughed, "though I was only contracted for three in three years, and I've done them, so I'll need to negotiate another contact. My publisher is anxious for another book, though, and is offering me a good advance on it, even though I haven't even begun to think about one yet - but the police one has to take priority. And researching it will take up a lot of time."

"I think we can move now," Simon said.

Blair glanced at the hall; the last stragglers were leaving. He picked up his backpack and the three headed for the exit.

Ellison woke to find that his chronic headache had returned.

He showered and shaved while the coffee was brewing, poured a mugful to cool slightly while he
was getting dressed, forced down the coffee and an unwanted slice of toast, washed his mug and plate and headed for work, knowing he would be early and planning on being away from the PD on the stroke of eight. As acrimonious as his relationship with Deb Reeves had become he was still on good terms with her father, and he wanted to discuss these fires with Mitch, see if the ex-fireman, who had been invalided out of the force over two years previously, had any insights. Deb, he knew, would not discuss her work with her father if only out of a mistaken belief that pretending fires didn't happen would help him get over the bitterness of enforced retirement.

If his unwanted ride-along was there in time, fine. If he was even thirty seconds late he would be too late, and that would be even better.

He walked into the half-empty bullpen to discover Sandburg sitting at his desk reading a newspaper.

"Oh. You're here in time, then."

Sandburg glanced up. "Good morning to you, too," he said cheerfully. "Yes, the way the buses run I either get here half an hour early or about two minutes late."

Ellison grunted. It could have been an acknowledgement of the comment, appreciation of Sandburg's conscientiousness, or disgust that he had chosen to arrive early instead of two minutes late, but Blair was inclined to think it was the third option.

It could be that Ellison was even more of a bear in the morning than he was later in the day, but Blair was under no illusion that his presence was in any way welcome to the detective, though he had half hoped Ellison had become resigned to having a ride-along. For the briefest of moments, he wondered how Ellison would react to any comments, however potentially helpful they might be, then decided he would make them anyway.

"I think you can expect another case of arson pretty soon," he said, and handed over the paper. He had drawn a ring around a personal ad.

"Poet - call Prometheus - 555-3617." Ellison scowled. "How do you get a case of arson from that?"

"Prometheus stole fire from the gods."

"So you think our arsonist is using the name to let potential customers know he's available?"

"If he doesn't, how do they know who to contact?"

"It's a reach, but it's possible," Ellison agreed. "Meanwhile, I want a word with Reeves' father - he was a fireman. He could have some ideas about these fires."

"Okay." Blair slung his pack over one shoulder and followed his reluctant partner to the elevator.

By the time they reached the Reeves house, Ellison knew his ex-girlfriend would have left; he rang the doorbell, and a minute later the door was opened by a man with a badly scarred face.

"Ellison!"

"Hello, Mitch."

"Now what brings you here this time of the morning? Let me guess - the fire at Gershwin's?"
Ellison nodded. "I don't know how much Deb told you - "

"Practically nothing, but that's Deb for you. She won't discuss her work with me. Well, come in - coffee?"

"Thanks. Oh - this is Dr Sandburg. He's riding with me for a while."

"Doctor."

"Call me Blair."

"You're not a medical doctor, I take it?" Reeves asked as he started the coffee.

"Anthropology. I'm doing a book on the work of the PD for the police academy, so I need to get my facts right."

"How long have you been riding with Ellison?"

"Since yesterday afternoon."

"Well, you've certainly been dropped in the deep end." There was a brief silence while he poured the coffee. "So," he went on. "The fire at Gershwin's."

"Deb's suspicious because Gershwin increased his fire cover a few months ago. He said it was because of a fire nearby."

"That makes sense. A lot of businessmen don't think to increase their insurance until something like that happens and they suddenly realize they're badly under-insured. Then if they have a fire soon after, everyone assumes they've set it."

"In this case - I think she's right. You're talking a very hot fire. Five thousand degrees."

Reeves stared at him. "To get that high it would need a high temperature accelerant."

Ellison nodded. "Any ideas what it might be?"

"Mmm... Rocket fuel's a possibility," he said slowly. "A few years ago, I was a civilian firefighter at Vandenberg Air Force Base - so was Dan Matson who's the fire chief here. We met at Vandenberg and we've been friends ever since. We had regular practice fires that simulated a rocket crash or explosion on the pad and they were always very hot. Dan's said he was grateful for the experience - it gave him an edge over the other applicants for fire chief."

"It wouldn't be easy for someone to get rocket fuel, though, would it?"

"Oh, there are ways. Someone like me - I could probably get it quite easily if I wanted it; there are still folk at Vandenberg who know me. All I'd need to do is say I want some for a practice run in case of... oh, a crashed aircraft. Someone like Dr Sandburg here - he'd have problems getting any."

"Thanks, Mitch. That could be very helpful."

They spoke for a little longer, with Ellison making what Sandburg recognised was a definite effort to be polite, before he made an excuse and left.

Once in the truck heading back towards the PD, Blair said quietly, "You've spoken with Matson, right? He's the fire chief, after all."
"Yes," Ellison said grimly. "And I'm just wondering why he didn't mention rocket fuel as a possible accelerant. Why I had to go and see Mitch Reeves to find out."

"You think Matson is the arsonist?"

"I'm beginning to think that's possible."

They went back to the PD. As he parked, Ellison said abruptly, "Can you use a computer?"

"Yes."

They had reached the bullpen before Ellison said, "Could you hack into Gershwin's accounts?"

"Should be easy."

"And could you access anything about Matson?"

"Could be harder, but I don't see why not."

He sat at Ellison's computer and began to work.

Ellison pulled up the report on the fire and began to read, grateful that his headache had once again eased.

Several hours later, Ellison looked at the results of Blair's work. "We need to see Banks."

Blair followed as the detective strode through the bullpen and knocked on Banks' door.

"Come in! Oh, it's you, Ellison. Hello, Doctor."

Blair grinned, mildly amused at the formality they had decided to follow in Ellison's presence.

"Afternoon, Captain."

"Cap, I think our arsonist is Dan Matson."

"Matson? The fire chief? Ellison, you can't go accusing the fire chief of arson without a lot of proof!"

"I know, I know, we've got to have solid proof," Ellison said impatiently. "But I've been speaking to Inspector Reeves' father, and he said right away that rocket fuel fires are very hot."

"So?"

"Both Reeves and Matson worked as fireman at Vandenberg. Reeves said he could get the stuff quite easily, if he wanted to. If he can, Matson can."

"Makes Reeves just as much a suspect - and he's bitter about being invalided out of the service."

"There's more," Ellison said. "Sandburg did a computer check. Just over two years ago Matson came close to losing his home - he'd fallen behind with his mortgage payments. Two or three days before the company was due to foreclose, he came up with the full payment for the house. That was a couple of weeks after the first of the very hot fires."

"Coincidence? It's certainly pretty circumstantial."

"And I think we've got Gershwin - three weeks ago he paid a hundred grand into an offshore island
"He could be salting away cash for himself against his firm going bankrupt - it's been losing money this year, hasn't it?"

"He did say things had picked up recently," Blair offered.

"He could still be providing a stash for himself just in case." Banks was playing devil's advocate, and Blair, at least, knew it.

"It's worth picking him up for questioning on suspicion," Ellison insisted. He was silent for a moment, then went on, "I don't think he'll know who he hired, though."

"There's that ad in today's paper - 'Poet - call Prometheus'. I think 'Prometheus' is the guy you're after," Blair said. "'Poet' has to be a pseudonym for whoever wants to hire him.

Banks looked from him back to Ellison. "All right. Mount a discreet - and I mean discreet - surveillance on Matson. If he is our perp, we'll need to catch him red-handed."

As the two men returned to Ellison's desk, the detective said, "I suppose you want to come along on the surveillance."

"It would be part of the ride-along, wouldn't it? And it would all be part of describing an on-going case."

"All right. But whatever I do, you're to stay in the truck, understood?"

"Understood."

Ellison sank into his chair; Blair pulled up a nearby chair that nobody was using and sat at the end of the desk. "Poet," Ellison muttered.

"Is there a list anywhere of all the big businesses in Cascade?" Blair asked.

"There'll be one somewhere in the computer," Ellison said. "Why?" He managed to make the question sound accusing.

"Most guys choosing a pseud aren't very imaginative about it. They usually pick something that's relevant to them. They might even use something that's already a nickname, either current or one they've had in the past. So I'd guess this guy's name, or maybe the name he trades under, is the name of a reasonably well-known poet."

"It's possible."

"It's almost a dead cert, man - a friend of mine in psych did a paper on that - it would be six, maybe seven years ago. Without telling us why he was doing it, he went round a hundred of us, and asked us to choose a name we would use if we wanted to write something anonymously - maybe a bit of fiction, since we were all planning careers in the various sciences and wouldn't want our own names linked to fiction. Six of us - six percent - picked something that couldn't be traced back to us, either through a link to our own name or a known nickname or, in quite a few cases, a known interest. Two of the six did admit, though, they'd picked a childhood nickname that had fallen into disuse; someone who'd known them as children might have remembered, though both said they didn't think so."

While Blair spoke, Ellison had pulled up a list of businesses on the computer. "All right, hotshot -
how well do you know your poets?"

"Uh... not all that well." He got up and went to stand behind Ellison, to watch the list of names scrolling up the screen.

"Stop!" he exclaimed after a minute. "Frost Services. What's that one?"

"Frost? Sells freezers, refrigerators, cooling systems, branched into air conditioning a couple of years ago. The owner's called Winter - Jack Winter. I never did understand why he didn't just call his business 'Winter Services' - there was still that reference to cold."

"Someone called Winter could easily have been given a nickname like 'Frosty' when he was a kid - especially with 'Jack' as his first name," Blair said patiently. "'Frost Services.' That's two poets, Ellison. Frost and Service. I think he's your buyer."

Ellison decided that he would watch the Frost Services building himself.

They had checked for Matson's days off, working to the theory that it would be easiest for him to set a fire on a day he wasn't expected to be available, and now, on Matsons's first day off after Prometheus had told Poet to call him, the truck was parked a short distance from the front of the Frost building.

Nothing seemed to be happening, and Ellison was starting to feel restless. He flicked on his cell phone.

"Any sign of movement, Brown?" he asked.

"No," came the reply. "His light is on, the television is on, his car's in the drive - he looks set for the evening."

Ellison scowled. "Call him."

"He's not here. He must have gone out the back."

"Right. Get over here. I'm going in." Ellison thrust the phone at Blair. "With luck I'll be able to stop him before he actually lights his fire, but if you see the slightest sign of fire, call the fire service."

"You got it."

Ellison moved quickly along the side of the building to the door; Blair couldn't see what he did, but he opened the door and slipped in.

Inside, Ellison paused, listening. He frowned; that steady thumping sounded like a heartbeat - what could it be? He moved slowly forward, and a figure holding a gun stepped forward. "That's far - Ellison!"

"Mitch?"

For a brief second Ellison thought they'd got it all wrong, that Mitch Reeves was the arsonist, then he realized that Reeves was carrying nothing that could be used to start a fire.

"You read the clues too?" he asked.

Reeves nodded sadly. "It's hard for me to believe a fireman would set these fires, especially
someone like Dan Matson," he said. "I kept hoping I was wrong, but I followed him from his house. He went out the back, where he had a van waiting. Not his own - he hired it."

Ellison glanced round, hearing soft footsteps at the far end of the building.

"This way."

They had to pick their way round rows of freezers, handicapped by the lack of light; ahead of them they saw a faint light, and knew that Matson was using a flashlight. He moved on, and they could see he had left behind a glass jar with a burning wick in the lid.

He moved on and lit the wick on another jar as Ellison exclaimed, "Cascade PD! Freeze!"

Matson ducked out of sight; a moment later a gunshot sounded and Mitch Reeves gasped and fell. Ellison dropped to the ground, scrambling to get round the barrier created by the row of refrigerators that were hiding him.

As he reached the end of the row, there was a burst of flame from the far end of the building and he knew the first wick had dropped into the... well, it had to be rocket fuel in the jar.

He was unsurprised to find Matson waiting for him; the fire chief's only hope of escaping unidentified was to kill the two men who had seen him. Matson fired too soon, giving away his position, and Ellison promptly fired back; Matson grunted and fell as the next bottle exploded.

Ellison looked at him, then left him and ran back to Reeves. He pulled Reeves up and over his shoulder, and headed for the door. He was halfway there when another bottle exploded.

As he stumbled out, Blair caught him, pulled him clear. "Call an ambulance," Ellison gasped as Blair helped him lay Reeves on the ground. "I'm going back for Matson."

Blair caught him. "You can't! It would be suicide!"

"I can't just leave him to die - "

"He left three innocent men to die in the fires he set," Blair said quietly. "I wouldn't like to see you as the fourth. I've called the fire service; they'll have protective clothing they can wear to go in."

"I know where he is - " Even as Ellison pulled against Sandburg's hold, flames spurted from the doorway, and he knew it was impossible to get back inside.

Blair reached for the cell phone again and dialled 911. "We need an ambulance at Frost Services," he said. "Police emergency." As he lowered the phone, the first fire engine arrived.

It wouldn't have surprised Ellison if Sandburg failed to appear the following morning, but when he walked into the bullpen just before eight, Sandburg was sitting at the desk with his newspaper, as he had been every morning since his ride-along started, looking as alert as if he hadn't had a seriously disturbed night.

He looked up and grinned. "I called the hospital after I got here - Reeves is going to be all right."

"Thanks," Ellison muttered. He rubbed his forehead. Blasted headache... He took a deep breath. "Now you get to discover the joys of writing up a report on a completed case.

"Incidentally, I thought I told you to stay in the truck?" There was nothing friendly in his tone.
"I didn't try going into the building," Blair pointed out, "and you have to admit you needed help to get Reeves far enough from the place to be safe."

Ellison grunted. He knew Sandburg was right, but he wasn't about to admit it. "If you'd been hurt, it would have been my ass on the line."

Blair opened his mouth to say that Captain Banks knew him well enough that the only person he would blame would be Blair; then he closed it again, suspecting that Ellison would not be happy to learn that his Captain and his ride-along knew each other.

"If you want, I'll sign a disclaimer for you," he offered. "Because I can't just stand by if I see someone in danger."

"Just... try to follow orders."

"Okay."

"Now - I need you to write down as fully and clearly as possible what happened, what you saw."

Blair grinned. "Ellison, I'm an anthropologist. Writing something down clearly and fully is so what we do." He didn't have to hear Ellison saying 'I'll believe that when I see it' to know that was what the detective was thinking.

He began writing.

Midway through the morning the phone rang, and Ellison answered. "Yes... yes... I'll be right there." He got up and turned to the door, then paused, remembering his ride-along. "Sandburg - I took that call, so I've got the case. There's a body been found near Miller's Pond."

"Right." He put down the report he hadn't quite finished, scooped up his pack and followed.

As they took the elevator down to the garage, Ellison realized that his headache was gone again, without his being aware of it. He was scowling as they reached the truck.

Blair watched, briefly puzzled by the scowl, then decided that there had been more to what Ellison had been told than he had said; something that was worrying him.

The body, its clothes soaked in blood, was lying on its back beside a bush a short way from the path, but something about the blood on the ground looked wrong - even Blair could see that. Ellison looked down at the body for some moments then turned to the young, pale-faced man speaking to the two uniforms in attendance.

He held out his ID. "Detective Ellison, Major Crime. You found the body, Mr - ?"

"Oh - George Keith. Yes, I found him." His voice shook; he was clearly in shock. "I come this way most days - it's a shortcut, you see. When I saw him, I thought at first he was ill, he'd maybe had a heart attack, something like that, so I rolled him onto his back. That was when I saw all the blood and realized... " He swallowed and glanced at his watch. "Detective, can I come in to the PD and tell you about it later? I'm a freshman at Rainier. My first lecture today is at eleven - I'll be late for it as it is, and I can't afford to miss it - "

"What subject?" Blair asked.

"Physics."
"I'll have a word with Professor Lowe," Blair said. "I'm sure that under the circumstances he can arrange for you to get a copy of the notes for the day and the opportunity to speak to a TA about anything you need explained." As Keith glanced at him, he went on, "Dr Sandburg, anthropology department at Rainier."

"Thanks. I... I'm not sure how well I'd be able to concentrate anyway, today, after... this, but I really can't afford to miss any of the physics lectures."

"Harder than you thought it would be, at this level?" Blair asked sympathetically.

"Yes. It seemed quite easy at school, but this is far more advanced stuff than we ever got at school."

"All right, now that's settled, maybe you can answer a few questions right now," Ellison said impatiently. "What time did you get here?"

"I left home about half past nine, and it takes me about ten minutes to get this far."

"And from here it would take you how long to reach Rainier?"

"Another six, maybe seven minutes."

"So you'd have been at Rainier around ten minutes to ten? With your first lecture at eleven?"

"I wanted to look up something in the library, so I was early."

Ellison glanced at Sandburg, who nodded. "Not unusual for a conscientious student, Detective."

"And when you got here? He's not lying beside the path, after all."

"I needed a pee, so I left the path and went into the bushes. I was going back to the path when I saw his legs sticking out from the bush there. I wondered for a moment if it was maybe someone homeless or a drunk sleeping it off, but then I thought maybe it was someone who'd taken ill, so I shook him, and when he didn't respond I rolled him onto his back - and that was when I saw the blood where he'd been lying. So I called the police."

"I see. Did you touch anything else?"

"No."

"Did you touch him again?"

"No way, man!"

"Did you see anyone else in the area?"

"No. The path's mostly used by students going to Rainier or people walking dogs. It's usually pretty quiet this time of day."

"Right." Ellison handed him a business card. "If you remember anything else contact me." He glanced at the nearby uniforms. "You got all his details? Fine," as they nodded. "Don't leave Cascade without letting us know. Now you go back home," he added with rough sympathy. "Dr Sandburg will clear things for you at Rainier."

"Thanks." He headed off back down the path, passing several approaching figures as he went.
Ellison nodded an abrupt greeting to the forensics crew and stood watching as they began to examine the body and its surroundings, while Blair took out his cell phone and called Rainier. Ellison tuned him out, his attention on the men examining the body.

After a few months, one of them stood and crossed to him, carrying something. "His wallet was still in his pocket - cash, credit cards, the lot."

Ellison pulled on gloves and took it, opening it to check the contents for himself. There were half a dozen business cards in it. "Andrew Boardman, Boardman Pharmaceuticals. Hmm. That's a fairly long-established business. He looks too young to be the owner; probably the owner's son. Have you any idea yet how he died?"

"He was stabbed."

"Right." He looked over at Sandburg, who was pushing his phone back into his pack. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah."

As the two men walked away, one of the Forensics crew said, "I didn't know Ellison had a partner?"

"He's a ride-along," one of the others replied. "Apparently he's researching for a book."

"Well, I don't envy him being landed with Ellison. D'you suppose Banks did it deliberately to discourage him?"

As they walked back down the path to the truck, Ellison stopped so abruptly that Blair nearly bumped into him. He bent and looked closely at the ground.

"What is it?" Blair asked. "I don't see anything."

"Blood," he said.

Blair looked closely at the ground and shook his head. "I don't see any," he said.

"There - and there." He pointed. He pulled out a small pocket knife and cut out a small divot, which he put into a small plastic bag. "It probably means that the victim was killed somewhere else and carried here."

He straightened, put the bag carefully in his pocket and carried on towards the truck.

Jim pulled in to the small parking lot at Boardman Pharmaceuticals. There was one space, with Andrew Boardman painted on the wall beside it. Ellison grunted and drove into the space.

They went into the building and crossed to the receptionist. "Detective Ellison, Cascade PD," he said. "I need to see Mr Boardman."

She looked startled as she pressed an intercom button. "Mr Boardman, someone from the police to see you. A Detective Ellison."

"Send him up."

"Go up the stairs, Detective; second floor, room five, and Mr Boardman's name is on the door."
Ellison nodded and turned to the stair.

Room five was actually opposite the stairway, the name 'Gerald Boardman' painted on it in ornate script. Ellison knocked on the door, and entered in response to the called "Come in!"

As soon as Ellison entered, the room's occupant continued, "You're from the police?"

"Detective Ellison. You're Gerald Boardman?"

"Yes, of course I am!"

"I have to ask you, sir, is Andrew Boardman your son?"

Boardman frowned. "Has something happened to Andy?"

"When did you last see him, sir?"

"Last night. He went off to a party, and didn't come home, but I didn't worry about that - he doesn't come home if he gets lucky, you know what I mean?" There was a knowing look on his face, an almost salacious tone in his voice.

Blair took a deep breath. It sounded as if 'Andy' had been something of a womanizer, and his father was proud of it.

"But he hasn't come in to work, and that's not like him," Boardman continued.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, sir, but a body was found near Miller's Pond this morning. ID on the body indicates that it is your son, but we will need someone to identify the body officially."

"What?"

"He was stabbed. The wallet was untouched, which argues that robbery wasn't the motive. Did your son have any enemies, do you know? Had any threats been directed at him?"

Boardman shook his head. "No. No. He's always been well liked." He looked at Ellison. "It would have been easy for me to bring him in in a position of authority, but I insisted he learn the trade. He's worked his way up and earned his place, and the staff all respect him. Even our competitors respect him because they know he knows the trade."

"He would have told you if he had been threatened?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure he would."

"He was at a party, you said; can you tell me where it was?"

"No, I'm afraid not. He didn't mention any names, just that he'd be at a party."

Ellison grunted, then continued. "Can I have a word with your staff? They might know something you don't - it's always possible he did get a threat but didn't want to worry you. And if you could come down to the PD tomorrow morning, say ten o'clock, to identify the body?"

"You don't want me to come now?"

"No, sir. We came here straight from Miller's Pond; it's doubtful that Forensics has the body back to the morgue yet. By tomorrow morning they might be able to give you some information," he
said smoothly, knowing that all Forensics would say was that the victim had been stabbed.

"Yes, of course." He pressed the buzzer on an intercom. "Marilyn, I'm going home. There'll be a Detective Ellison coming to have a word with you in a minute. Give him as much co-operation as possible."

"Yes, sir."

Boardman looked up. "If you go to room seven, Marilyn's my secretary."

"Thank you, sir." Ellison turned to leave the room, beckoning Blair with a quick, abrupt nod of the head. Blair followed, his instinctive urge to say 'I'm sorry' squashed by an unreasoning dislike of the man.

The door to room seven stood open, and for a moment Blair wondered whether Boardman insisted on it, Marilyn liked to have it open, or if she'd just opened it because she knew they were coming.

She was standing at the window when they went in; handsome rather than beautiful, probably in her mid to late thirties, she had the kind of face that would still be attractive when she was ninety. She swung round when she heard their feet on the polished floor, crossed to the door and shut it.

"Is this about young Mr Boardman?" she asked quietly.

Ellison nodded. "He was found dead this morning."

The expression that flickered across her face was gone before he could identify it; the one thing he was sure of, however, was that it wasn't grief.

"What happened?" she asked.

"We don't know yet. His father said he was well liked; as an employee, would you agree with that?"

"No, I damned - " She broke off, took a deep breath, and began again. "No," she said more quietly. "Nobody dared tell his father - he thought the sun shone out of Andy's ass, and god, but Andy knew how to play on that! Nobody liked him. You want to know who might have killed him? Go into any of the offices here and look around. There isn't one senior whose work Andy hasn't stolen in some degree, who had no choice but to smile and accept it if they wanted to stay here - and in spite of Andy, most do - Mr Boardman is a generous boss. Andy's fucked half the female staff, too - the only one who said no, right at the start - she lost her job. She was supposed to have stolen something of Andy's, and it was found in her locker, right enough, but she wasn't that stupid. Andy 'persuaded' Mr Boardman not to prosecute if she just left quietly. Nobody else he's approached has dared say no. He never tried anything on with me - I'm married, which alone wouldn't have stopped him, but I'm too old for him - he likes - liked - young flesh, though he didn't usually go after jail bait - but several of the youngsters, eighteen, nineteen years old, have cried on my shoulder the next day. The one thing he wasn't was a considerate lover; basically it was rape. The most recent one - Heather's only seventeen, has only been here two months and he went after her last week. She hasn't been back to work since. I went to see her the next evening; she was worse hit than most, almost suicidal. Not surprising, really - the poor kid lost her mother just before she started working with us; there had been just the two of them, and from what she said they'd been close. She was just beginning to get over it and then that happened. She kept saying, 'I told him no, over and over, begged him to stop, but he wouldn't listen, said I owed him for the meal and he was going to collect whether I wanted to or not.' That's the sort of morals he had.
"And he was a practical joker - always the kind of 'joke' that would cause the maximum nuisance. One man was hurt a few weeks ago - broke his leg. Several of the staff who went to help him fell too. Mr Boardman walked in on the furore, and he fell. Andy had scattered tiny ball bearings on the floor. Mr Boardman gave the staff a pep talk about safety and there haven't been any of the more extreme 'jokes' since, but nobody was relaxing.

"He sometimes amused himself by telling the filthiest stories you can imagine to the younger folk on the staff, knowing how much he was embarrassing them. That was probably his least objectionable trait," she said thoughtfully. "No, detective, you won't find anyone on the staff mourning him. You might even hear someone saying the killer deserves a medal."

"Thank you," Ellison said.

Blair, in keeping with his position as an observer, had been saying nothing, but now he said, "Marilyn - sorry, that's the only name we were given for you - when we first spoke to Mr Boardman, I got the impression that he knew his son was a womanizer, and was... well, proud of it."

"Marilyn Nelson." She sighed. "Andy was the younger son. His older brother Derek - Derek is nice. Very nice. Quiet, helpful, and he really does know the business. He never stole anyone else's work. He's also gay, and Mr Boardman reacted very badly when he found out. He lost his temper, and told Derek there was no place for him in Boardman Pharmaceuticals unless he was a proper man. Derek kept his temper, said fine, he could manage without his father's money, and walked out. Last I heard he was working for a pharmaceutical firm in San Francisco and in a committed relationship. I don't think his father knows."

"And Mr Boardman sees - saw - Andy's behaviour as proof that he was a 'proper man'?"

Marilyn nodded. "Andy came into the business just after Derek left. I don't know if he was always spoiled or if it was just Mr Boardman's reaction to what happened with Derek, but... " She shrugged. "I think though he was probably always spoiled; if he hadn't been he wouldn't have gone rotten quite so fast."

"I think you've told me all I need to know about Andy," Ellison said quietly, "but what you've said only serves to make everyone in the firm a suspect. For example, what were you doing last night?"

She smiled. "I was at home with my family - I've got three children. We spent the evening after dinner watching television until nine, which is the youngest one's bedtime. Then I read with the others till ten, when they went to bed. My husband and I went to bed just after midnight. We tend to have a quiet life - my husband isn't much of a mixer, and if I'm honest I prefer to be with my family, too, though occasionally I have to go to meetings outside Cascade with Mr Boardman."

Ellison went through the staff, talking to one after the other, finding - as Marilyn had said - that none of them were sorry to hear of 'Andy's' death. None of them used the name respectfully. Most of them claimed to have been quietly at home the previous evening; only two or three had been out anywhere, and all had been in company, so had witnesses to their activities.

Finally, as it got near five o'clock, when most of the staff went home, Ellison called it a day.

As on previous days, he said, "Where do you want dropped off?"

"Are you going back to the PD?"

"Yes."
"That'll do fine, man."

Ellison looked at him. "Are you sure?" The ride-along was an annoyance, certainly, but weird as it seemed, he found the man's presence strangely relaxing and the odd comment he had made surprisingly insightful, and he had to admit Sandburg had never taken advantage of the times they had been out in the truck when it was time to go home, always asking to be dropped off at a bus stop.

"Yes, I'm sure. I can get a direct bus from there once we finish - you'll have to make out a report, won't you?"

"Yes, but just because I have to work some overtime doesn't mean you have to do it too."

"If this book's to give trainees an accurate overview of police work, things like necessary overtime should be included," Blair said quietly.

Ellison was aware of a dawning respect for his unwanted partner's conscientiousness, but he just grunted.

He stopped off at Forensics to hand over the evidence bag with the soil he insisted included blood. "If this matches the victim's blood, then he was killed somewhere else and carried to where he was found."

"He died where he was found," the Forensic examiner said grimly. "If he was carried there, he was still alive, though he might not have been conscious. But he clearly came round, probably briefly, when he was lying there, and tried to push himself up - there's soil under his fingernails."

Ellison grunted.

"There's one other thing. You saw the blood on the front of his trousers?"

"Yes. I assumed he'd been stabbed in the stomach?"

"No. There are two stab wounds, both in the chest area. Neither is severe enough to kill him. No - his penis was cut off, then his pants were refastened."

"That says it was some kind of revenge killing, probably done by a man who considered one of his womenfolk had been violated by the victim," Blair said. "It's not common, but historically you got it in some cultures."

Wolfe looked at him, frowning. "I'm sorry, I don't think I know you?"

"I've got him riding with me as an observer," Ellison growled. "Dr Sandburg - he's writing a book on the work of the PD." As an afterthought, he added, with a glance at Blair, "This is Dan Wolfe."

Blair grinned a little uneasily. "I don't think I'd like your job, man."

"Just a different kind of detective work. I wouldn't like to be working the streets." Wolfe shrugged and glanced back at Ellison. "As I said, the two stab wounds weren't that severe. I think they were meant to weaken, rather than kill, but he bled to death from the genital injury. I suspect that Dr Sandburg could be right about the motive. The killer might not have meant to kill him, just castrate him."

Ellison made a face. "I think I need to have another word with the female staff at Boardman's."
"It doesn't have to be one of them," Blair said quietly. "He could have been picking up girls from other places, too. If I may make a suggestion - I'd start looking for someone whose culture is likely to include the concept of blood for dishonour."

It was very late when Ellison finally finished writing out his report and returned home, nursing a pounding headache. Banks had sent Sandburg away two or three hours earlier, saying that there was really nothing he could add to Ellison's report and he wasn't paid to work hours into the evening.

He stumbled into the bathroom and took two aspirin, knowing from recent experience that they wouldn't help more than marginally, but desperate to try something, anything to ease the ache that made it so difficult for him to concentrate. He wasn't hungry, but he went to the kitchen, heated some soup, double-checked that he had switched off the ring he'd used, and forced the unwanted soup down.

A combination of habit and sheer will-power took him round his loft making sure everything was secure, and he made his way up the stairs to bed, stumbling once on the way. He fell onto the bed, lay still for a moment, then sat up, kicked his shoes off, realized he didn't have the energy to undress although he was vaguely aware that in the morning he would regret sleeping in his clothes, and lay down again, pulling the comforter half over himself before curling up in misery.

The aspirin weren't working, but sheer exhaustion allowed him to sleep.

Blair sighed as he let himself into the warehouse where he lived. It had been split into several segments by flimsy plasterboard walls, and from the voices he heard he was not the only tenant, though he still had to meet any of the others. He suspected that at least one was a prostitute using this as a place to bring her clients, possibly even more than one. Its one merit was its cheapness and, when he had expected to be back in Cascade no more than a few weeks before heading off on another expedition, he had been willing to rough it with a table, a chair, a sleeping bag and airbed, a kettle and a microwave, though since there was only one socket he couldn't have both on at the same time; he was too doubtful of the quality of the wiring in the building to use an adaptor, afraid of overloading the system. However, now that he knew he'd be here for at least a year, he knew he would have to look for somewhere better. Unfortunately most of the more affordable apartments had been snapped up by students while he had still been in the Aleutians studying the Inungan, and he would have to pay far more than he wanted to to get a decent room. If Ellison had been a little more welcoming he could have taken a few hours off to find somewhere, but the surly detective's obvious wish to get rid of him made Blair determined that he would be the most dedicated ride-along in PD history, and that he would ask no favors.

He wouldn't have been here now if Simon hadn't sent him home.

Blair opened the tin box he used as a larder - he had quickly discovered that he - and the other tenants - shared the building with a healthy population of rats, although their numbers were kept in some sort of control by a number of probably feral cats - and decided on a microwaved 'baked' potato with cheese. He didn't have much food left in the box; he'd better do some shopping soon or he'd be reduced to buying takeaways, and he prided himself on being self-sufficient enough to do all his own cooking.

There was a cold tap and a sink against the outside wall of his 'home'; he washed the potato, pricked it several times with a fork, and popped it into the microwave. While he waited for it to cook he grated the last of his cheese to go over it.
He pulled out his notebook and started to scribble his observations for the day while he waited for the potato to finish cooking.

When the microwave pinged he put down his pencil and went to get his meal. While he ate, he considered his cop 'partner'.

It didn't need a psychiatrist to recognise that something serious had happened to the man at some point in the past to make him so standoffish. But what? He'd been left for a year and a half in the Peruvian rainforest with no apparent attempt made to rescue him, certainly, but that alone shouldn't have been enough to cause the kind of lasting psychological damage Blair could see in him. He wasn't too bad at dealing with the public, but he clearly kept all his fellow cops at arm's length, to the point where he was very obviously disliked. Okay, he might be a guy who didn't suffer fools gladly, and his definition of 'fool', at least in his own workplace, could be pretty wide. So far Blair thought he had managed to hold his own - he had certainly managed to hide how much Ellison's attitude had the potential to bother him - but then he had years of experience in hiding his real feelings from potential bullies. Small - he had been slow to put on any height - and studious, a keen reader, he had been a natural target for bullies at school, although university hadn't been quite so bad.

The weird thing was that sometimes Ellison seemed almost human. He was at his worst, his most obnoxious, first thing in the morning - he obviously wasn't a morning person. He didn't seem to have much sense of humor either.

And yet...

And yet...

Sometimes he seemed almost human, and in those moments, Blair knew he did like the man.

His meal finished, Blair returned to his notes.

Suddenly he stiffened - that had been gunfire! It sounded close - perhaps in another part of the building? In that case, it made sense for him to get out; the internal walls were of the flimsiest and would afford no shelter at all from a stray bullet. He pulled on his jacket, grabbed his backpack, pushed his notebook into it and fastened it, slung it over a shoulder as he turned for the door, then as an afterthought paused to grab his sleeping bag. It might be safer to head for Rainier and spend the night on the floor there. For the first time he regretted not having any kind of office, but he could probably persuade the caretaker to let him into Professor Buckner's office - he would be out of Rainier and back at the PD long before Buckner made an appearance, but even if he wasn't, Buckner was unlikely to object, since Blair had left one or two things of value, like his laptop, in Buckner's care, rather than have them at the warehouse.

He bundled the bag under his arm, moved quickly to the door, and slipped out.

Once outside, he ran, wanting to put some distance between himself and the warehouse.

He was perhaps two hundred yards from it when it exploded.

He had just passed a doorway; he ducked back and into it.

His cell phone was in his pack - virtually the only thing of value he carried around with him. He pulled it out and called 911. Then he called Simon.

The fire service arrived within five minutes, the first black and whites just behind them. He stayed put in his doorway; he had a suspicion that the cops would be very doubtful of anyone who
admitted to living in the warehouse, even although he had proof of identity on him. If he waited for
Simon, the simple fact that the Major Crime Captain could vouch for him in person would
probably save him a lot of hassle.

Simon arrived a few minutes later, and as he got out of his car, Blair left the shelter of the doorway
and jogged over to him. "Hi, Simon."

"Blair. You're all right?"

Blair nodded.

"You raised the alarm, right?"

"Yeah."

"So what were you doing in this area?"

Blair grinned wryly. "I lived in that - " He nodded at the burning building.

"What?"

"All I could get for a reasonable rent when I came home. It was divided up into several units - I
never saw any of my neighbours, though I heard them occasionally; I've no idea how many people
lived there. It wasn't as if I spent much time here - it was really just a place to sleep."

"So you've lost everything?"

"Only a secondhand table and chair and a cheap microwave. One of the anthropology professors let
me leave most of my stuff in his office - I thought it would be safer there."

"I'm glad you had that much sense," Simon said drily. "So what happened here tonight?"

"There was gunfire." He glanced at his watch. "That would be about ten, fifteen minutes ago. The
dividers were made of plasterboard; I knew I couldn't depend on them for protection if whoever
was shooting was shooting blind. So I grabbed my pack and sleeping bag and got out. Didn't see
anyone, but I ran, anyway."

"Sensible."

"It was just seconds later that the place blew up. I was just passing a doorway in that next building,
so I sheltered in it and called 911, then I called you." He grinned. "Then I stayed put till you
arrived. I didn't want the hassle of being suspected as a homeless druggie who'd stolen a wallet that
gave him an apparent identity."

Simon grinned back, then said seriously, "So there might be people in there who were caught and
trapped when it blew?"

Blair sobered immediately. "Like I said, I know other people lived there, though tonight I didn't
hear any voices while I was eating. I didn't see anyone when I first left the building, and I'd have
expected anyone in there to have done what I did and get the hell out when the shooting started;
and after I called 911 I didn't see anyone coming out, either. Of course, there was another exit on
the other side of the building that was more used than the one opening this way, and it's possible
people used that and kept on running. I came this way because my 'room' was close to the door that
opened this way - it was the door I normally used anyway."
Simon nodded, not saying that most people who escaped a fire would probably have stopped to watch, hoping that they would be able to salvage something once the fire was out.

Two of the uniforms came over, and Simon flashed his ID.

"Captain Banks. We're not entirely sure what happened - there was a call raising the alarm, but whoever made it hung up fast without giving his name and we haven't seen any sign of anyone in the area."

"Er - that would be me," Blair said meekly. "I was waiting over there for Captain Banks." He pointed.

"And you are?"

"Dr Sandburg, Rainier University."

"And your address, sir?"

Blair's lips twisted in an unamused smile. He pointed to the burning building. "In there."

He saw the expected shock on both faces, but it wasn't enough to lighten his spirits.

"It was the only place I could get on short notice - I'm attached to Rainier, but I do a lot of field research, and I've only been back in Cascade a few weeks. I didn't expect to be here more than a couple of months, and all I was needing was somewhere to sleep."

The cop looked from Blair to Simon and back again.

"So can you tell me what happened, sir?"

Blair ran through the sequence of events again.

"So people might have been in the building when it blew, but you've no idea how many."

"That's right. The guy who owns the building would know how many of the 'rooms' were rented, but he could very well lie and say two or three when the real number might be ten times that. The place was only marginally fit for habitation, and he has to know that. After I knew I'd be in Cascade for at least a year, rather than just another month, I started looking for somewhere better, but it's not easy finding a reasonably-priced apartment in a university city."

"And if we need to speak to you again? Where can we contact you?"

"Either at Rainier or more likely through Captain Banks."

"Dr Sandburg is currently working with the PD," Simon explained.

The two cops nodded and turned away. Simon waited till they were out of earshot before he said, "Where were you planning on going?"

"I was hoping I could sweet-talk the caretaker at Rainier into letting me sleep in one of the offices. I've got my sleeping bag and I'm quite used to sleeping on the ground."

"Come on. It'll still be the floor, I'm afraid, but you can stay with me for a day or two till you find somewhere."

"That's good of you, Simon, but I don't want to impose - "
"I'm offering, and you'll hurt my feelings if you turn me down."

"Then all I can say is thanks. What I said to those uniforms is true - I have been looking for somewhere else, but the choice is mostly between areas worse than this and pretty highly priced places. I'll probably have to settle for highly priced, but take it short-term while I keep on looking for something more realistic."

Simon started his car. Blair didn't even glance in the mirror to see the last of his still-burning home.

Ellison's headache was no better in the morning, and it wasn't helped by the stink of traffic fumes and the many, many other smells assaulting his nostrils or the sheer volume of noise assaulting his ears. The traffic lights, too, seemed far brighter than usual, and the first time he had to stop he pulled shades from the glove compartment and put them on. They helped, but only a little.

He was almost pleased to discover that for once his ride-along wasn't sitting waiting for him. What was it he had said? 'Half an hour early or two minutes late'? Looked like today he was going to be that two minutes late, and Ellison decided he was going to take the chance to snarl a little.

Banks strode in, and Sandburg was just behind him - and in time. Ellison scowled a 'welcome'. Banks paused beside Ellison.

"Dr Sandburg won't actually be riding with you today, Ellison," he said. "His home was destroyed last night and he needs to find somewhere else to stay."

"Destroyed?" Ellison was surprised to find that somehow it mattered. "What happened?"

With an effort, Banks kept his surprise at Ellison's question hidden, and although Ellison was looking at Sandburg, it was Banks who answered. "There was an explosion and fire in the building. He spent the night on my floor."

"I'll just have a quick look through the classifieds and see if there's any possibilities there before I try any agents," Blair said as he snagged the chair that the cleaners kept putting back against the wall.

Ellison sank into his own chair, pulled a folder towards himself and leaned his head on one hand as he pretended to read. He was thinking furiously. Because yet again his headache had eased almost as soon as Sandburg appeared... and he couldn't forget that the previous evening, it had begun to redevelop not too long after Sandburg left. He realized, too, that when Sandburg was around, a lot of the noises that were deafening him seemed to fade, the too-bright lights dimmed...

Maybe an experiment of sorts was in order...

He looked up. "Sandburg. Even if you find someplace today you probably wouldn't be able to move into it for a day or two. I've got a spare room - it's small, but you're welcome to use it for a week or two - give you more time to look around, find somewhere reasonable. At least you'd have a bed rather than sleeping on the floor... though you might think Banks is more congenial company."

Blair looked thoughtfully at him for a moment. Ellison's tone was flat, almost as if he expected to be turned down, the final comment horribly self-deprecatring, and for the second time in twenty-four hours he wondered briefly what - or more likely, who - had hurt the man so badly that he was obviously wary of opening himself to anyone.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "I'd appreciate that. There's certainly nothing in here - " he flicked the
paper - "in an area that looks even remotely respectable. Where I was was bad enough."

"Where were you?" It was the first sign of interest in him that Ellison had shown.

Blair grinned. "A converted warehouse near the docks."

Ellison stared at him. "And you considered that respectable?"

" Barely. Hey, when I took it I thought it was only going to be for a month or so, till I headed off on another expedition. But the expedition fell through, and then I got the chance of this book on the PD. I was looking for somewhere else, but until last night it didn't seem all that urgent."

"I can't think of any warehouse near the docks that was converted into apartments."

"Well... I doubt it was an official, approved conversion. Probably the owner trying to make some money off an otherwise derelict building. I used to hear voices sometimes but I never actually saw anyone else."

"You were lucky you weren't mugged," Ellison said.

Sandburg grinned. "Just because I'm an academic doesn't mean I'm totally helpless."

"Or your place broken into and everything stolen."

"I'd nothing there worth stealing."

Ellison looked doubtful, and this time Blair laughed outright. "I mean it, man. It's not even worth going back to see if I could salvage anything from the fire. Apart from my sleeping bag - which I carried out with me - everything of value I had in the place was inside my pack.

"What I will need to do, though, is go back to Captain Banks' house and get my sleeping bag, then get some clothes from Rainier. I've been keeping my wardrobe - such as it is - in a colleague's office there." He stood. "I'd better let Captain Banks know where I'm moving to."

He moved quickly to Simon's office, knocked and went in.

"Hello, Blair."

"Simon. Just to let you know - Ellison's offered me a bed till I can find somewhere."

"Ellison?"

Blair grinned at the disbelieving note. "Yup."

"And you accepted?"

Blair nodded. "There's something about him, Simon. I don't know what it is, but something about the way he offered... I had the feeling he'd be dreadfully hurt if I'd said no. He'd have hidden it, but... " He sighed. "I get the feeling most of his attitude is to hide how easily he can be hurt."

Simon looked searchingly at him. "You haven't known him very long - "

"Maybe that's why. You said he was a bad-tempered bastard when he came out of Vice; he already had that reputation, and everyone saw what they expected to see. Now I know you warned me what he's like, but I'm an anthropologist; I observe people. And you know something? I like him." He shrugged. "Don't think I didn't appreciate your offer, to say nothing of the floor space last night, but
I know it isn't really convenient for you having me at your place. I'll drop by this evening to get my sleeping bag."

"See if Ellison will follow me home when we leave here and you can collect it then. And Blair - if it doesn't work out and you want away from him before you find a place of your own, my floor is still there."

Blair grinned. "I won't forget, and thanks."

He went back to Ellison's desk. "Captain Banks suggests we follow him home tonight so I can get my sleeping bag."

"Or he could bring it in tomorrow for you - I've got plenty of spare bedding, you won't actually need it."

"That's good of you, but I don't want to be a nuisance. Anyway, we'll have to pass his apartment on the way to Rainier, and I really must go there to get some clean clothes. Though if you tell me your address, I could easily get a bus - "

"Quicker if I drive you." There was an ungracious note in Ellison's voice again, almost as if he was reluctant to admit to a philanthropic impulse and looking for a logical reason for it. "Even simpler if we went there this afternoon - I want another look at where Boardman's body was found."

"Okay."

They went first to Rainier, where Ellison insisted that Blair take all his property - not that there was much, only a large suitcase, a box about two feet in each direction, and a small case containing a laptop and its peripherals.

"Is this the lot?" Ellison asked.

"I don't need more than that while I'm spending a lot of time travelling," Blair pointed out. "I only have the laptop because I need it for my writing. I'll sell it when I leave and buy a new one when I get back to Rainier after my next expedition. You were in the army, man - don't tell me you had as much as this during your army years."

"You know about that? I suppose Banks told you."

"Yes and no. I remembered reading about you in Time. He just confirmed it."

"Oh. Yes. You don't want to believe a fraction of what that article said."

Blair grinned as they started back to the truck. "I didn't. I could have done a better job in my sleep. I could tell which bits were genuine and which bits the reporter had made up."

"You could?"

"I'm an anthropologist. I've been to the Montana region of Peru. That reporter hadn't been closer than three thousand miles and knew squat about the tribes there. Reading between the lines of what did look accurate, it was pretty clear that you couldn't say much, so he made up as much as he needed to meet his page count."

"I still can't talk about it." He looked at Blair. "When were you in Peru?"

"Three years ago. My first expedition after getting my PhD. We were only there for a couple of
months - I'd have liked to stay longer, but that was the time limit we were given. Where I was was relatively safe. The Chopek were doing a pretty good job of protecting their territory."

They put Blair's property in the cab of the truck and Ellison relocked the doors. "Have you any idea how to get to Miller's Pond from here?"

"This way."

It took them almost ten minutes to reach the spot where yellow police tape still marked off a patch of ground. Ellison paused and looked around.

They had already passed four people walking dogs, and along the length of the path as far as he could see Ellison could make out another one. He studied the ground for some minutes, then straightened, shaking his head.

"I learned a bit about tracking in Peru," he said, "but there have been too many people tramping around here. I should have thought to look yesterday." He began to head back towards the truck.

They swung past Banks' apartment and stopped to get Blair's sleeping bag before heading on to Ellison's loft apartment. Ellison showed him the small room off the living room.

"This is great!" Blair exclaimed.

"The drawers in that unit are empty," Ellison said.

"Thanks."

While Blair began to unpack, Ellison went through to the kitchen area. "Any preferences in food?" he called back.

Blair straightened from his suitcase. "Ellison, I've lived with tribes that considered a bowlful of nice juicy grubs the height of haute cuisine. About the only thing I haven't ever eaten is human flesh, though I've spent time with tribes who did, inside living memory. In some areas, human flesh was the only animal protein readily available. No preferences; I can eat anything."

Ellison paused to consider the available food, surprised to find that once again he was hungry. He was beginning to be even more certain that Sandburg's presence was helping him in some way, though he couldn't think why that should be. "I don't have much in the cupboard," he said. "I've been too busy this last day or two to think of shopping."

Blair pushed the drawer with his clean clothes shut, put the suitcase with the clothes that needed washed down beside the unit, and wandered though, saying, "The nearest I've ever actually seen to what might be called cannibalism was while I was with the Yanomano. Someone died and the relatives ate the dear departed as a sign of love and respect." He put his notebook and pencil on the table.

"Eh?"

"As they put it - putting someone in the ground is cold. As long as they haven't died of disease, where could be warmer for them than the bellies of their relatives? So they cremate the bodies, pound the bones into powder and make a kind of soup out of it."

"You're joking."
Blair shook his head. "They think our custom of burial doesn't show the proper respect for our dead."

Ellison looked at him for a moment, then gave a short, unamused bark of laughter. "I was trying to visualise Gerald Boardman making soup out of Andy's body as a sign of love and respect."

"Or anyone actually wanting to eat Andy," Blair commented. "From what we heard about him, I'd say he'd be guaranteed to give anyone severe indigestion."

"You know, I didn't think an academic would appreciate black humor," Ellison said.

"Some do. Some don't. Anthropologists often see things so apparently cruel that if they didn't laugh they'd cry."

Ellison turned to him. "There's not much here - less than I thought. There's a Chinese not far from here that delivers." He opened a drawer. "I should have a menu somewhere... ah, here it is."

Blair glanced down it, accepting that for tonight he wouldn't be self-sufficient. "Sweet and sour chicken with extra mushrooms and boiled rice," he decided.

Ellison picked up the phone and placed the order.

"We'll have to stop on the way home tomorrow and get some supplies," he said as he switched on the television and sat, flicking channels.

Blair began to scribble in his notebook. After a moment he looked up. Ellison had begun to watch a program, but he had the sound turned so low that Blair had to strain to hear it.

"You've got that turned very low," he said idly.

"Any louder would hurt my ears," Ellison replied absently.

Blair stared at him. "You must have very sensitive hearing?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"I can hardly make out a wor...d." He hesitated for the briefest of seconds before finishing the sentence as he saw the expression that crossed Ellison's face. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not a freak." It was a desperate whisper.

Blair stared at him. "Whoever said you were?"

"My father. He said I couldn't hear things or see things, that only a freak would say... " He broke off, as if aware of having said something he shouldn't.

Blair stared at him. "You saw that blood yesterday. On the path. You can see better than normal, or you wouldn't have seen it. Hear better than normal or you wouldn't hear the TV at that volume. Have you any idea how much of an advantage that has to be to you as a detective?"

"Is it?"

"Well, of course it is!"

"Sandburg, all it usually does is give me a headache."
"Oh, man! Do you have a headache now?" Blair's voice was sympathetic.

He shook his head. "No."

Blair said quietly, "Ellison, what you have is a gift. I've searched for years for people with heightened senses, but so far all I've found are people with slightly better than normal taste and sense of smell. You're the first one I've met who has sight and hearing enhanced."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why search for people with heightened senses?"

"Years ago, I came across a book written in the eighteen hundreds by Sir Richard Burton. He was an explorer back in the days when exploration really was exploration. He came across a number of people he called sentinels - people whose genes gave them enhanced senses. The whole subject fascinated me; I wondered if people with enhanced senses were still around today, and if they were, what they did with their lives.

"I finally came to the conclusion that modern civilisation makes it almost impossible for potential sentinels to develop their senses; that in sheer self-defence they must suppress their ability otherwise the amount of stimuli would drive them insane. Even the native tribes I visited wouldn't admit to having had sentinels for many years. The nearest I ever came to finding one was three years ago, when I was in Peru; I overheard two young men talking, and from the way they spoke, it sounded as if they knew, or had known, a sentinel. I asked Incacha - the shaman; we'd become quite friendly - we seemed to have quite a lot in common, in spite of the differences in our backgrounds.

"He would say only that Enqueri had been their sentinel, but he had left them long ago."

The knock on the door interrupted the conversation; Ellison moved quickly, opened the door, paid for the meal and took it to the kitchen table. "Come and eat while it's still hot."

Something about his attitude told Blair that Ellison was glad of the interruption.

Their meal eaten, the dishes washed and the empty cartons disposed of, the two men returned to their seats in the living room.

Blair waited patiently for Ellison to break the silence. At last he said, very quietly, "I was Enqueri."

It took all of Blair's self-control to remain seated and not yell triumph to the sky. He took a deep breath. "All five senses?" he asked quietly.

Ellison nodded. Blair could see in his eyes that he expected to be ridiculed.

"That's... Man, you are something I never thought I'd ever meet. Do you realize how much it means to me - to meet, finally meet, a full sentinel?"

"You really mean that?"

Blair nodded. "Yes. Was it your time in Peru that triggered - no, you said your father... You had the senses as a child, then?"

"Yes, but they went away. They came back in Peru. After I came home they more or less went
away again, but this last few months... I thought I was going crazy. I wasn't actually aware of seeing or hearing better, it was just that everything seemed to be pressing in on me. I had headaches all the time."

*And not daring to talk about it didn't help, I'll bet,* Blair thought.

"What's really odd, though - and I just realized it today. When you're there, the headaches ease."

"Did Incacha ever say anything to you about a sentinel needing a partner? Someone to work with him, help him control his senses?"

"Incacha did that. You know, I was happy in Peru. But then the army came, and brought me back."

"And you lost your helper."

"Sandburg - you know, it's weird. When I was in Vice, before I was partnered with Jack Pendergrast, I had bad headaches. When I was partnered with him, I had some headaches but they weren't severe; then he disappeared, and the headaches came back. But when I'm with you, it's like it was when I was with Incacha. I just didn't put it together before."

"I was terrified when Banks assigned me to take you around. Terrified I'd slip up and let you see... let you see what I am."

"What you are is the fulfilment of my wildest dreams. And - well, I'm not a shaman, I doubt I know half of what Incacha did, but I'm willing to help you as much as I can."

"But this is temporary. You'll be moving on."

"Maybe I can help you to find enough control in the next few months that you'll be able to manage. If not - I can always stay here. There's no way I'd desert a sentinel, now that I've found one, if he needed anything I could do for him."

"That's... generous of you. Especially since I went out of my way to make you feel unwelcome."

Blair chuckled. "In fact, no, it's utterly selfish. You'll see.

"Anyway - now that's settled, what happens tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow I - we - go through the notes I took of the interviews with Boardman's staff."

"Looking for what?"

"Inconsistencies."

"It wasn't necessarily one of the staff, you know. Maybe a male relative of one of them, and she doesn't know. Or maybe someone related to a girl he picked up somewhere else, like at that party his father mentioned. Maybe a girl who had a brother there keeping a quiet eye on his sister's virtue, and he did it. Murder by person or persons unknown, with no way of finding out who it was."

Ellison nodded. "And that's why some crimes remain unsolved." He yawned. "I'm for bed. I usually get up around half past six and shower, breakfast, leave just after half past seven for the PD - how do you want to fit around that?"

"I had to get up about an hour before that when I was in the warehouse - if I get up at six? Unless
that'll disturb you. Would you rather I showered after you?"

"No, that's fine." He yawned again, then padded over to the door and fastened the chain, went to
the bathroom; left it and headed for the stairs. "Goodnight, Sandburg."

"Goodnight... Jim."

Three steps up, Ellison paused, looked at Blair, and then smiled. "Goodnight - Blair."

Blair moved almost before Ellison reached the top of the steps, heading for the bathroom. One
thing he was really appreciating here was hot water, he decided as he washed his hands. He
brushed his teeth then headed for the small room below Jim's. He switched on the light beside the
bed, then went and switched off the main lights, finding his way back to his room both by the light
spilling out of the doorway and the light from the bedroom above his head - a light that went out
when he was part of the way back to his room. He wriggled into his sleeping bag, switched off his
light, sighed contentedly as he settled into the comfort of the bed, and slept.

He woke at his usual half past five and began to sit up, then remembered where he was. He lay
back enjoying the rare comfort of a proper bed, allowing his mind to wander.

A sentinel.

He had finally found a real sentinel. He was getting the chance to see the man in action. He could
write a paper - No. Whatever notes he made of Jim's abilities he would write in the personal
shorthand he had devised many years ago to let him take notes at the speed most lecturers favored;
that way nobody else would be able to read them - or at least, not easily.

The last thing Jim would need was the kind of circus that would undoubtedly develop if the truth
about his senses became known.

His bladder was beginning to make its presence felt, and he got up and moved as silently as
possible to the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, showered and shaved, he went back to his room and began the sometimes
tedious, and always lengthy, task of brushing out his hair.

He heard his host padding down the stairs and into the bathroom; when he heard him leaving the
bathroom to return to his room, Blair quickly fastened his still-damp hair into its usual ponytail and
went to the kitchen area. He checked the fridge and the cupboards, finding virtually nothing except
some bread and a little very mild cheese.

"I haven't been very hungry recently," a voice behind him murmured almost apologetically.

He swung round. "Headache?" he asked.

"No. I'm feeling better than I've done at any time since I left Peru."

"That's good. Is there anywhere reasonably close, or on the way to the PD, where we could get
breakfast?"

"Yes. Toni's, a block from the PD."

"Let's go there, then. And tonight we can stop on the way back to the loft and get some food in."
Blair hesitated for a moment. "Have you been eating pretty much out of tins and packets recently?"
"Not really - all that stuff started to taste wrong, somehow."

"I'm not surprised, all the preservatives and additives that go into them. There's pretty solid evidence that a lot of them can cause problems for some folk - allergies and such like. Someone like you, already sensitive - I hate to think what that stuff could do to you."

"I've not actually been eating all that much - I've not been hungry."

"Low blood sugar wouldn't help you either," Blair commented as they left the loft. "Hunger can cause headaches too."

They left the truck at the PD and walked to Toni's. There, Blair ordered for them both, and Jim surprised himself by eating everything on his plate and enjoying it. Blair paid the bill, waving aside Jim's offer to pay half, saying, "This was my suggestion", and they left, walking briskly back to the PD.

At Jim's desk, they split the reports from Boardman's between them and began reading. Only half of Blair's mind was on the words in front of him; the other half was occupied in wondering if Jim's senses might help him identify a possible culprit who could then be intensively questioned in the hope of getting him - or her - to crack.

He was half aware of puzzled glances being thrown their way, and could guess at the cause; this was the first morning since he had begun his ride-along that Jim hadn't been scowling irritably at everyone in sight.

Everyone in sight had to be wondering why.

"Ellison!"

In the relaxed comfort of no headache, Jim had been concentrating totally on what he was reading, and jumped as the sheer volume of Simon's voice hit his unprepared ears.

"You too, Doctor." Simon's voice was quieter this time as he turned from his door back into his office.

Blair gripped Jim's arm. "Try to relax," he murmured, and Jim nodded as he got up.

They went into Simon's office. Simon was already sitting at his desk again, frowning at a sheet of paper in front of him. He looked up, and Blair noted the worry in his eyes.

"Captain? What's wrong?"

"I've just been given a report on the fire at the warehouse where you were living."

"And?"

"You told me you never saw anyone, though you sometimes heard voices?"

"That's right. The door I normally used was at the back of the building, because I found it was more convenient for the bus; I imagine most of the others in the place used the front door - there was space there for parking. And I usually wasn't there during the day - basically it was just a place for me to sleep."

"Yes, there were two or three badly damaged cars in front of it. Male or female voices?"
"Both. Mostly male, though."

"When did you hear those voices? Morning or night?"

"Well, I was usually out of there by eight before I started riding with Jim, and since then it's been before seven; so pretty well exclusively at night. Sometimes late into the night."

"Could you ever make out what was said?"

Blair shook his head. "Sorry. Is it important?"

Simon pursed his lips. "I'm not sure. The thing is - at least part of the building was being used as a store for drugs."

"Are you saying Blair's under suspicion because of that?" Jim snapped.

Simon looked from one to the other. "Jim? Blair?" he asked.

Blair grinned. "We... came to a sort of understanding last night."

"An understanding."

Jim nodded. "Let's say you don't have to worry any more about me not giving him full cooperation."

"And can I ask how this miracle of understanding came about?"

Jim and Blair looked at each other. Blair's look said. "It's up to you."

Jim said slowly, "It's a long story, Captain. You remember how I got better-tempered when I was working with Jack?"

"Yes."

"Blair has the same effect on me."

"That doesn't make sense." Simon looked at Blair. "Can you explain it?"

Blair glanced at Jim again. "You might as well tell him," Jim said.

"Jim has heightened senses. It's been the input from them, overwhelming him, that made him so bad-tempered; he's been suffering from severe, almost constant headaches for months."

"Heightened... Like in that first book you wrote?"

"That's right. They... you could say they surfaced when he was in Peru; sentinels always had a helper, and the tribal shaman acted in that capacity, so he was able to use them effectively. But then he came back to Cascade. In the rain forest, there isn't the weight of stimuli that there is here; so here, without Incacha to help him, he was swamped by sensory input."

"It took me a few days to realize it was Blair's presence that was easing my headaches," Jim said. "But last night we talked it out."

"And what happens when Blair's ride-along finishes?" Simon demanded. "You know perfectly well ride-alongs are only for ninety days."
"Simon, we have that long to find a way to let me carry on riding with Jim," Blair said.

"Blair, for as long as I've known you, you haven't been able to settle anywhere for long; you kept coming back to Cascade, certainly, but you've had - how long? Six, seven months here in the last three years. Won't you want to head off on another expedition as soon as you've finished your book for the academy?"

"No, because I've finally found what I was looking for. I realize now I kept going off in the hope of finding a tribe that had a sentinel."

"You mean you want to write about Ellison?"

"No! How can I explain... A sentinel is someone with a genetic advantage; he can see better than most people, hear better, scent things ordinary people can't - it's a great advantage if a tribe has someone with those senses to act as a watchman, a guardian. But he needs a helper, and I suspect that's genetic too, or Jim wouldn't have had the problems he did - if just anyone could do it, he'd have found someone to work with easily enough.

"So - not everyone has the instincts or ability to be a sentinel's helper. We think Jack Pendergrast had at least some ability, because Jim's headaches weren't as bad then.

"But Pendergrast disappeared, and he was left struggling on his own again. Then I happened along - someone who had studied sentinels, and coincidentally had spent time in Peru with the very tribe Jim worked with. They even told me about his existence, but using his Chopec'k name.

"And just by being there, not even knowing that he was a sentinel, I was able to help him. It's clear to me now that I must have a helper's instincts and ability; I was being driven to find a sentinel. He needs me, Simon - and you know what? I need him. Just by being with him, I'm more relaxed."

Simon looked from one to the other.

"All right, say I buy this. How much do we tell Chief Warren? What do we tell the other detectives?"

"If I'm to get an extended ride-along, we need to tell Chief Warren at least some of the truth," Blair said. "The simplest thing to do would be to let him read Do Sentinels Still Exist?, and go on from there, possibly minimising the extent of Jim's ability. As for everyone else - it's none of their business."

"Er - just what is the extent of Ellison's ability?" Simon asked.

"We don't know yet," Blair said frankly. "I need to think about that, find some way of testing it as well as the most effective way of helping him to use it."

"It's probably simplest to say I'm long-sighted and appear have a slightly better than average range of hearing, with taste and sense of smell about the level of the people who work as tea or coffee tasters," Jim suggested.

"That makes sense," Blair agreed. "Keep what we admit to within, or at most just outside, the range of what can be found reasonably easily, say we don't know what his exact range is - which is the truth - and that it's just unusual that Jim's got the lot, not just one sense. Which is also true," he added thoughtfully. "God, you can tell a great lie by sticking to the exact truth!"

"And why do you want to minimize what you admit to?"
"Well, apart from anything else, wouldn't some of the bad guys automatically put out a contract on him, if they didn't try to take him out themselves, because they were afraid he'd see too much, hear too much?"

"We really don't need them to know I've got an edge," Jim agreed.

"Blair, do you think those senses of Ellison's could help find out what happened at the warehouse?"

"Well, we won't know unless we try," Blair replied.

"All right; let's step back a few minutes. Some of that warehouse seems to have been used as a storehouse for drugs."

"Anyone could have rented a 'room' there," Blair said. "All I had to do was pay weekly in advance - cash only, and no questions asked. One of the other people living there might have been a drug dealer and the guy who owned the place wouldn't have known. Or cared. There were times I suspected that some of the rooms were rented by prostitutes and just used for their - er - business."

"We'll go now and check it out, anyway," Jim said.

Jim stopped his truck in front of the extensively-damaged building, and whistled.

"Yeah," Blair said quietly. "Pretty thorough."

"You were lucky to get out."

"Jim, when I heard gunfire, there was no way I wasn't going to get out. There was maybe... oh, two, three minutes between the shooting and the explosion. I went out the back."

Jim flashed his ID at the uniform standing guard at the front door, and asked, "Is Forensics in there?"

"Yes."

Jim nodded acknowledgement and headed into the building.

The partitions had gone; though it was possible to see, in the charred furniture, where some of the rooms had been. Four people were carefully going through one part of the building. Jim crossed to them.

"Oh. Ellison." The woman's voice was flat.

"Ms Chang. This is Dr Blair Sandburg - he's riding with me. Blair, Serena Chang."

Blair grinned. "Hello."

"He's our main source of information on what happened here last night," Jim added.

"Oh. You were passing?"

"No. I lived here." He glanced round. "Over there - beside that back door."

"So what have you found?" Jim went on briskly before she could react to that.

"We found drugs in this area." Serena Chang led the way to one side of the front door. "There was
a body here, quite badly burned - but the way he was lying part of his body was protected from the flames, and it was obvious he'd been shot. The fire could have been started to dispose of the body."

"Serena!" The call came from one of the others in the Forensics team. "We've got another body."

"On my way." She returned her attention to Jim for a moment. "This is the third body. We don't know for certain yet what killed the second one, but from the initial on-the-spot examination, trauma to the head is the most likely cause."

"Caught in the explosion," Blair muttered.

"Probably," she agreed as she moved away.

Once they were alone, Blair said quietly, "Right, Jim. Do you remember Incacha saying anything to you about concentrating so hard with one sense you lose touch with reality?"

"No, but I don't remember ever concentrating on just one sense. I mostly used sight and hearing together."

"Mmm. Interesting. 'Zoning out' on one sense was one of the things Burton mentioned. So don't just use your eyes; use your sense of smell too."

Jim's nose wrinkled. "Blair, do you have any idea of the stench in here?"

"Okay. Let me think a moment... Jim, you know how if you're exposed to one particular smell for a while you begin not to notice it? If his sense of smell is to be any use to him, logically a sentinel has to be able to filter out specific odors. Start with the strongest. That's the smell of burning, right?"

"Yes."

"So register it. Now see if you can ignore it, catch the smells it's masking."

"I don't... Yes! It's working!"

"Right. What's the next strongest smell?"

Jim shook his head. "There isn't one. Everything else is faint - just traces left after the fire."

"All right. Try to concentrate on the faint smells, one at a time, and don't forget to keep looking, as well."

"Blair, what am I looking for?"

"I don't know! You're the cop, for heaven's sake! Now this was a drugs store - what would you normally look for if it hadn't been burned?"

"I wouldn't. Anything involving drugs would usually be handled by Narcotics, and I don't know why this one isn't."

"Because I heard shooting?" Blair suggested.

"Possibly." He looked around carefully, and suddenly paused. "Wait - what's that?"

He pulled on a pair of rubber gloves as he crossed to where a half-burned shelf lay leaning against the wall. He reached under it and pulled out a piece of partly-charred paper.
Blair joined him. "What is it?"

"It seems to be a list of chemicals - almost like a shopping list."

"That figures. When you get people using stuff like temazepan as a drug - some designer drugs have to use medical chemicals. The dealer would have to get his supplies from somewhere."

Jim peered at the top of the page. "I can't make out the first letter of the first word, but the other three letters are 'n,d,y'."

"First one would have to be a vowel, making that a name, maybe? Like 'Andy'?" They looked at each other. "Boardman?" Blair whispered.

"It's possible," Jim muttered. "Working for a pharmaceutical firm, trusted son of the boss, he'd be in a good position to fiddle the books and provide some specific chemicals to a drug factory. Well, I was meaning to go back there today anyway." He put the paper carefully into a plastic bag and sealed it, slipped it into his pocket, and carried on looking around, but found nothing more. "Now - let's take a quick look at where you lived. You might be able to salvage something."

"I'd doubt it," Blair muttered. "It's not as if I had anything worth salvaging anyway. I carried out the valuables - my pack and sleeping bag."

He was right. The kettle was a twisted lump of plastic, the microwave, while less damaged, had a door that would never open again, the table and chair were mostly burned. The tin box that he'd used as a larder was smoke-blackened, and when he pulled the lid off, it was to reveal a couple of cooked-to-a-cinder potatoes, some heat-browned paper and some dust. All that was left of the airbed was some twisted scraps of rubber.

They took some minutes to wander round the burned-out shell; they were about half-way back to the Forensics crew when Jim paused, bent and peered under the remains of a bed lying on its side leaning against a wall, and called, "Chang! Two more bodies."

Serena came over quickly, looked, and grunted. "Caught totally unexpectedly in the explosion, I'd guess."

"But there was gunfire - wouldn't that have given them some warning?" Blair asked.

"The way they're lying - I think you were maybe right about the prostitutes. I'd say it's a rentboy and his latest john, and they were in mid-fuck - they maybe didn't even register the shots," Jim said. "You're a guy, Blair - you know what it's like when you're really close to shooting your load. Nothing else matters."

"All right, leave them with us, Ellison," Serena said.

"I think I've seen everything I need to," Jim went on, and turned to leave.

Blair grinned at Serena, a little shakily. "Nice meeting you." As he followed Jim, he heard her calling one of her team over.

Outside, Jim leaned against the truck for a moment, taking deep breaths. He looked at Blair. "There's a downside to turning down the sense of smell," he said. "I didn't realize it, but I was breathing very shallowly."

"That was the first time you'd tried doing that, wasn't it?"
"Yes."

"Practice, my friend. Practice. It'll get easier to filter out specific odors and still breathe normally. Trust me. What about your headaches?"

"Clear. No headache."

"That's good."

The truck pulled into the parking lot at Boardman's Pharmaceuticals and once again Jim parked in the space marked 'Andrew Boardman'. The neighboring space, marked 'Gerald Boardman' was empty, and Jim growled, "Damn!"

"You asked him to go in yesterday morning and identify Andy," Blair reminded him. "It can't have been easy for him, identifying his son's body. He may have decided to take a few days off. Marilyn should know."

"And she'll certainly know where he lives." He jumped down from the truck. "I want to see the staff again, anyway."

"Jim, can you hear people's heartbeats?"

"I don't know. Remember this stuff is pretty new to me. What I did in Peru doesn't really count. I don't know yet all what I can do."

It was a return to the Ellison-with-attitude, but Blair, who had never really worried about Jim's attitude anyway, remained unfazed by it. "Okay, before we go in; there's just you and me here. Can you hear my heartbeat?"

Jim hesitated, concentrating. "Yes," he said after a moment. "I can also hear air whistling in your lungs and your stomach rumbling - or maybe it's your gut."

"Ah, well, you can tune those out. Just concentrate on the heartbeat. Got it?"

A brief pause, then - "Got it."

"When you're speaking to the staff, concentrate on their heartbeats. It's medically and psychologically proved that when someone is lying, at least about something important, their heartbeat usually speeds up. All right, simple nerves can do it too, so all it actually proves is a measure of anxiety. If you know they're feeling anxious about something, though, you can intensify the questioning of those particular people."

Marilyn Nelson looked up as they entered her office. "Detective Ellison! I'm afraid Mr Boardman isn't here - he said he'd be having a day or two off."

"Yes, we noticed his parking space was empty," Jim said. "And before I leave, perhaps you could give me his home address; I may not need to speak with him again, but it would be useful in case I do want a word."

"Yes, of course."

"I wanted another word round the staff, though. There's one aspect of the killing that's unusual and wasn't released to the press when we confirmed the identity of the victim - one of those little
details that can trap a killer."

Her heartbeat didn't alter, and her expression remained one of polite helpfulness, and Jim immediately wrote her off his list of suspects.

"There is just one other thing; do you know if there's been any discrepancy recently in the supplies of chemicals your firm has been handling?"

"It's odd you should say that; our stock manager reported a shortage of several chemicals three days ago. Nothing major considering how much we handle, but more than could be accounted for by people mismeasuring and weighing out a few grains more than is wanted every time something is used over several months."

"I'd have thought, with chemicals, people would have been careful that quantities would be exact."

"Detective, some of the medicines we make, we make in considerable bulk. If we're weighing out several kilos of something, we're not using the scales that are accurate to a thousandth of a gram. An odd gram extra in ten kilos isn't significant."

Jim was far from convinced, but he let it pass. "How much was missing?"

"I'm not sure, because Tony took his report straight in to Mr Boardman; he told me why he want to see Mr Boardman, but I didn't see his figures; Mr Boardman kept the report."

"Can I see it?"

"I think Mr Boardman took it home with him. I usually file anything he's left on his desk after he goes home, and it wasn't there."

"All right - thanks. If you could just give me a note of the address, I don't think I'll need to bother you again."

She scribbled the address on a notepad and gave him the sheet. He pushed it into his wallet and said, "We won't be long - I just want another quick word with everyone. Come on, Blair."

As Blair followed him out of Marilyn's room and down the corridor towards the main office, Jim said quietly, "Remind me never to get any of Boardman's products in future."

Blair grinned. "I doubt any manufacturer of artificial remedies is any more accurate, though they would undoubtedly say they're very careful with their measurements. One reason I stick with herbal medicine."

They left Boardman Pharmaceuticals with Jim convinced that none of the staff knew anything about the killing; Jim glanced at his watch. "There's time for a bite to eat before we see Boardman."

"Hungry, are you?"

"Yes - Blair, this is the first time I've wanted lunch in weeks!"

"Good. Good! That shows you're beginning to get some sort of positive control."

"It shows that having a 'helper' is important and that you're doing your job." Jim's voice was rough, off-hand, almost as if he hated having to admit it, but Blair realized that he was just a little embarrassed.
The best way to help him through the embarrassment was to ignore it. "So - where do you want to go?"

"Doesn't matter. The first place we come to?" He pulled in even as he spoke, stopping just past a hot dog stand.

"Junk food!" Blair muttered, while inwardly conceding that hot dogs were less 'junk' than some things.

They ate their hot dogs quickly, then Jim drove on.


Jim grinned. "A businessman as successful as Boardman has to go for ostentation," he said. "If he doesn't, people don't think he's successful." He led the way up the path.

He rang the bell; there was no answer.

They returned to the PD, but before they had time to sit, Simon called for them. "Ellison, I need you to come with me. A car went into the river mid-morning, at a beauty spot close to where Pendergrast was supposed to be handing that ransom money over, and the divers who went down to recover it found a second car. It's been there quite a while. From their description - it could be Jack's car."

Simon drove. He pulled in beside the police vehicles already there, and they got out and walked over to where two cops were still speaking to a very shaken-looking civilian.

"What exactly happened?" he asked.

One of the cops nodded towards the year-old Mercedes still dripping at the side of the river. "Mr Young here was a witness."

"Mr Young?"

"I'm a freelance photographer, here taking pictures for consideration for postcards." He sounded very shaken. "That Merc drove into the parking area and just kept on going. The driver didn't even try to stop. He drove right into the river. I called 911 right away, but there wasn't anything else I could do - I can't swim."

"And the time it took us to get here, there was nothing we could do," the cop said quietly. "The driver didn't try to get out; he was still strapped into his seat when we hauled the car out. But the divers who went down saw that other car, so we recovered it, too. There was a body in the driver's seat. Both bodies have been sent to the morgue."

"Do we have an ID for the driver of the Merc?" Jim asked.

"Business card in his wallet said Gerald Boardman -"

"Boardman Pharmaceuticals," Jim finished. At least half of his attention was on the second car, the one that had obviously been in the water for quite some time. "Excuse me." He walked over to the cars and looked over the wreck.

The number plate said 'Jacks Toy'.

He frowned. There was a general smell of decay, but there was more...
"Can we get the trunk open?" he asked.

Simon joined him. "Anyone got a bar?"

"Do you need one?" Blair asked. "Can we assume the trunk is locked?"

Simon reached forward. The trunk lid creaked open.

"Oh, man!" Blair said, turning away from the half-decayed body in the trunk.

"I'd guess that's Philip Brackley - the guy who was kidnapped," Jim said quietly. "I'd say the kidnappers had probably already killed him; then they killed Jack, put Brackley's body in the trunk, and pushed the car into the river. It's a sheer drop, the water's deep, what were the odds on anyone finding it? Unless another car was seen going in."

"And even then - flood water can carry a lot along with it," Blair said quietly. "They might have expected the whole lot would be washed further and further down river with every winter spate and end up being washed out to sea."

"So why did Boardman kill himself?" Simon asked when they were once more in the PD.

"Because his son was killed?" Blair suggested.

"No, there's more to it than that," Jim said. He pulled out the singed list of chemicals and handed it over. "I found that at the warehouse, in the part that was used for drugs. We think the first word is 'Andy' and suspect 'Andy' is - was - Andrew Boardman. We also know from Boardman's secretary that the day before Andrew Boardman was found dead, Boardman's store manager gave him a report on a shortage of several chemicals."

Simon looked at the list. "You think Andrew Boardman was selling some of his firm's chemicals to this drug dealer?"

"It's possible. It's fairly circumstantial, but it's possible. It's equally possible that Boardman came to that same conclusion."

"You think Boardman killed his son then committed suicide?"

"Wait a minute," Blair said. "I could see Boardman attacking Andy over the theft of the chemicals and what they were to be used for, even killing him, but what about the genital mutilation? Boardman was proud of Andy's womanizing - you could see that. He'd have no reason to do that."

"Unless the mutilation was a red herring," Jim said slowly.

"Going back to that - has it occurred to you that there's one member of Boardman's staff you haven't spoken to?"

"There is?"

"The one who's been off work since her 'date' with Andy?"

Jim's jaw dropped. "You're right. I did forget about her."

"Phone Marilyn and get her address. We've got time to go and see her this afternoon."
The young woman who answered Jim's knock looked as if she was hanging on to sanity by her fingernails as she peered through the narrow gap that was all the safety chain would allow.

Jim held up his ID. "Detective Ellison, Major Crime. My associate, Blair Sandburg."

"We're sorry to bother you," Blair said - they had decided that it might be best if he did most of the talking, since his social skills were better than Jim's, and it would leave Jim free to concentrate on her reactions. "We understand from Mrs Nelson that you've had a difficult time recently and we really don't want to upset you any further, but we need to ask you one or two questions about Andrew Boardman. May we come in? Or if you'd rather not have a man come into your house, would you come down to the PD with us? If you do that, we'll make sure you get back home safely."

She hesitated, then closed the door and they heard the safety chain sliding out; she opened the door again. "Come in."

In the living room, she took a deep breath, then said quietly, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No, thanks," Blair said instantly. Good manners might have forced her to offer hospitality, but he could see how much it would cost her to have them there longer than absolutely necessary. "This is going to sound like a silly question, but we have to ask it. You're Heather Naismith?"

"Yes."

"And you work for Boardman Pharmaceuticals?"

"Yes."

"What was your job there?"

"Just general office work. I'd no training, but after Mom died, Mr Boardman - the boss - came to see me. He said he was an old friend of Mom's and offered me a job. I... I don't think I was really needed, I think he was just being kind because he knew I'd need a job, but it gave me job experience and I was learning quite a lot."

"And then Andrew asked you to go out with him."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Yes. I... I was flattered. I'd never been out with a man before. Everything was fine till he brought me home, then he said... he said..."

"All right, Heather - we know what happened. You don't need to say it. So you called in sick next day?"

"Yes. I couldn't face seeing him."

"Then Mrs Nelson came to see you? And you told her what had happened?"

"Yes. And Mr Boardman came too, the next day."

"Had Mrs Nelson told him, do you think?"

"No, I don't think so. Anyway, I told him, and he sort of went very still. Then he said he'd speak to Andy and I wouldn't ever be bothered by him again. To take another few days off, and I'd know when I could go back to work."

Blair nodded. "Have you been listening to the news at all, or seen a paper?"
"No. I haven't been out since... We always kept the freezer well stocked and I've been eating out of it; I haven't needed to go out."

"You can go back to work tomorrow, if you want," Blair said. "Andy's dead."

She stared at him. "Dead?"

"Someone killed him."

"Killed? Oh, no - Mr Boardman said I wouldn't be bothered by him again. Did Mr Boardman kill him, because of me? But why?"

"We don't know."

"What'll happen to Mr Boardman?"

"I'm sorry to tell you - he's dead too. His car went off the road into the river; he wasn't able to get out."

Once back in the truck, Blair said, "What did you think?""She was telling the truth." Jim started the engine. "I think I want another word with Marilyn."

At Boardman Pharmaceuticals, they found Marilyn sitting staring at a sheet of paper on her desk. She looked up as they entered.

"Detective Ellison - I'm glad you're here. I was just going to call you. I found this on Mr Boardman's desk." She handed him the sheet of paper and he read through it quickly.

Marilyn - contact Derek; I know you've been in touch with him. He is now my heir, and I hope he will keep the firm intact.

I trust you to help Heather Naismith as much as possible.

Heather doesn't know it, but she is my daughter. I met her mother after my wife died and I loved her very much, but she was married and unwilling to leave her husband; so all we ever had was the occasional afternoon together. After she discovered she was pregnant, she terminated our affair, but there was no doubting the child was mine. I kept track of her. After her husband died I contacted her, but she didn't want to renew what we'd had. When she, too, died, I seized the chance to get to know my daughter.

When I discovered what Andy had done... Then to discover as well that he was stealing some of our chemicals to sell to a drug dealer...

It would, I think, be best if Heather never learned that Andy was her half brother. My will leaves her some money - I worded it so she will think it's compensation for what he did. Please make sure she doesn't refuse it.

Gerald Boardman

"I wish he'd split this into two," Jim muttered. "It's tantamount to being a confession, so we can't just quietly destroy it, which is what we'd need to do to protect Heather. Still, it wraps up the case."

"What will happen to Mr Boardman?"
Jim and Blair glanced at each other. "Nobody's notified you?"

She shook her head. "Notified? That sounds... But his references to his will have me worried."

"He's dead too. He drowned himself earlier today, either to avoid facing a murder charge or because he couldn't live with the guilt of killing the son he - what was it you said? 'He thought the sun shone out of Andy's ass'."

"Maybe both," Blair said.

They returned to the PD to the discovery that there had been a gun in Boardman's car that matched the bullet taken from the dead man in the warehouse.

"That finally wraps it," Jim said. "He was trying to set right everything his son had done wrong."

"It might have been better in the first place if he'd made a better job of rearing Andy," Blair said drily. "So killing himself might have been guilt at having ruined Andy's life."

"Well, that's something we'll never know," Simon commented. "And we've got a kind of closure on Jack Pendergrast, too. It's not going to be a top priority after all this time, but we'll be reopening the Brackley case. No, I'm not giving it to you, Ellison - you're too close to it. And that's my final word. You and Blair finish off the paperwork on the Boardman case."

Jim glared at him for a moment; unintimidated, Simon glared back. Finally Jim gave a defeated gesture and walked out.

Blair followed him.

The next few days passed relatively quietly. Blair took the opportunity to go to some of the other departments to have a word with the Captains there about their work, and Jim, remembering his initial response to the 'long-haired neo-hippy punk' chose to go with him, Vice in particular being likely, he knew, to give Blair a hard time; his glowering presence forced the other cops to take Blair seriously right from the start.

("I'll manage on my own," Blair said reasonably.

"I know," Jim replied, "but I want to go with you. Some of these guys can be hell on rookies; I used to be one of the worst. Our attitude was 'If you can't take the heat...' and god, we applied it! I want to bypass that so that you can get your work there done fast so you can get back to Major Crime where you belong."

"Where I belong?"

"Yes, Blair. I don't know yet how we're going to swing it, but that's where you belong. I need you there - not just for three months, either."

So with Jim's backing Blair got the information he wanted for his book from Homicide, Vice and Narcotics in fairly short order.

They were just walking back into the bullpen from their visit to Narcotics, intending to pick up their coats before heading back to the loft, when Simon intercepted them. "We've got another killing, Ellison. Same MO as the Frasier case. Rawling didn't get anywhere with it, so I'm giving it back to you."
"So what happened?"

"We got a call from someone at Club Doom."

"Huh? Club Doom calling the PD?" Blair exclaimed.

"Uh-huh. You know the place?"

"Used to go there sometimes when I was still a student. It was unusual - used a live band rather than a DJ."

"Yes. Their regular drummer didn't turn up a couple of nights ago, but they didn't think too much about it - the guy took drugs and sometimes he was too stoned to play - they said they just shuffled around the way they usually did when he collapsed on them."

"I'm surprised they kept him if he was that erratic," Jim muttered.

"If it's the same lot that played there four or five years ago," Blair said, "Billy Bright controlled the band. He hired and fired. And he was a pretty brilliant drummer."

"Yeah, that's the name, Billy Bright," Simon said. "It might be his real name, it might be a stage name. Anyway, when he didn't turn up again last night, they began to get worried, because he didn't usually miss two nights in a row. The club stays open till some weird time in the morning -"

"It used to close around 5 am," Blair said helpfully.

"Thank you, Doctor. After it closes the staff stay on for another hour or so to clean up, then head home to bed. One of the band, and a guy who called himself the 'assistant manager' of the club, decided to call on Billy once they'd wakened up - they didn't say so but I got the impression they were shacked up together. They got there about 3 pm, didn't get an answer, so they tried the door and it was unlocked. Went in, thinking they'd find Billy sleeping it off - and found him drowned in the bathtub, fully clothed and with a yellow scarf tied round his neck. Their first thought was that he'd been meaning to take a bath and fell in, maybe hit his head or was still too out of it to try to get out, till one of them realized that if that was the case he'd have been face down and the water probably still running, not lying on his back in a half-filled bath. And that if he was alert enough to be taking a bath he'd probably have been at least partly undressed. That was when they began to wonder if someone had killed him, so they called the cops.

"Of course, as soon as Forensics saw the yellow scarf, they contacted us."

"Can we assume it's the same killer, and not a copycat?" Jim asked. "The yellow scarf is a trademark, and the papers all mentioned it, but the other three victims were naked, and the reporters were never told that. Then the other killings were each about four weeks apart, pretty well coinciding with the full moon. It's nearly ten weeks since Susan Frasier was killed, and this is the dark quarter."

"Well, the address is 3906 Dawson Street, apartment 3F. Go and check it out. Sorry, Blair, this means another evening on the job."

"Right," Jim said even as Blair replied, "That's okay, Simon. Apart from the notes I got today from Captain Yuan, everything's written up." They turned to go.

There was a uniform standing guard on the door at 3906 Dawson Street, and another at the door of apartment 3F. Jim waved his ID, and the cop opened the door for them.
Inside, Blair shivered. Jim glanced at him. "Something wrong?"


Jim went first to the bathroom. It had been dusted for prints, he noted, the residue still thick; concentrating on the prints he could see, he decided they were all the same and probably belonged to the dead man. Someone had emptied the bath, probably to make removing the body less messy.

He moved into the living room, Blair at his heels.

There was a bleak quality to it; the furniture was very basic, and it set the tone for the entire apartment.

"What kind of money would Bright have earned at Club Doom?" Jim asked.

"Pretty reasonable," Blair said. "But remember, he was feeding a drug habit. He wouldn't want to waste money on unnecessary luxuries like decent furniture."

Jim grunted. "Yeah, Yuan said something like that, didn't he? Once they get the habit nothing matters but getting their next fix."

Blair stood looking into the bedroom. The bed was a mattress on the floor with a few dirty blankets thrown over it. A wardrobe without a door stood against one wall; Jim went over and began to look through the clothes. "God, these are almost rags!" he said.

"He would have had one good rig-out for work," Blair said. "Club Doom isn't exactly known for high fashion, but the staff would have to dress at least half-way decently."

"Nothing here that looks good."

"Maybe he left his working clothes at the club." Blair looked around again. "You know, I have a feeling we're missing something, but I can't think what it is. The other deaths - were there any common features?"

"Not really. David Lash was the first one - he'd been in and out of mental homes most of his adult life. According to his father - we spoke to him on the phone, he wasn't willing to travel to Cascade when we had a wallet on the body to identify him - he'd always been 'strange', never been able to make friends; he'd been almost unhealthily devoted to his mother, who'd had the sole care of him - the parents were divorced when the son was about three. Had his first breakdown when he was ten, after she died.

"Next one was Adam Walker. He'd been in a car accident and his legs were paralysed; he could get about in a wheelchair, but he was bitter about it, according to his neighbours.

"Both of them were... I suppose you could say unstable. Desperately unhappy.

"The third was Susan Frasier. She was a successful businesswoman, well-liked, had a steady boyfriend - she'd everything to live for."

"And now Billy Bright - successful enough career, but a serious drug habit," Blair said thoughtfully. "So we've got three who had problems in their everyday lives, but one who didn't."

"Yeah. If it wasn't for Frasier, I'd have said it was someone taking out men he saw as losers, maybe genuinely believing he was putting them out of their misery."
"Can I see the reports on them all? I'm an observer. Anthropologists are meticulous about detail. I might just see something you've missed."

"Well, I'm certainly not seeing anything here. Okay, we'll go back, and you can have a look at the reports."

Blair read through the report on Lash, and shook his head. "I feel sorry for this guy," he said. "Mark you, I blame his mother; reading between the lines, she wasn't willing to let him grow up - he was always going to be her baby." He turned to the next one. "One thing," he said after a minute. "Both Lash and Walker spent time in the same mental institution - Watsonville, California."

"I noticed that," Jim agreed. "They were even there at the same time."

Blair read on. "Jim," he said. "All the victims have the same birthday. Maybe that's significant?"

"It could be - but Blair, have you any idea how many people have the same birthday? Day and month, at least?"

"Oh, I know - do you know how many people you need to have in a room - random selection - before there's an even chance that two of them will have the same birthday?"

Jim shook his head.

"A couple of dozen. It doesn't work in something like a classroom, because that's not a random selection, but I'd bet that in the bullpen there are at least two with either the same birthday or just a day or so difference. But serial killers often pick something to target, and that's the one thing all four have in common. That says to me it's not just chance."

"You could be right, but we can't put a guard on everyone in Cascade born on May 24th."

"Oh, well," Blair said cheerfully, "at least I have my own personal guard."

"Your birthday is May 24th?"

Blair nodded.

As they left the PD that night, Blair said, "I have to go to Rainier - I'm giving a lecture tonight. I should be home not long after ten."

"When do you have to be there?"

"Well, I was thinking of heading there now."

"I've got a better idea. Come home, get something to eat, then I'll take you there. Would you mind if I stayed to hear your lecture?"

"Sure it wouldn't bore you?"

"Blair, I lived with the Chopek for months. I'd be interested in how other tribes lived. What are you talking about?"

"The cruelty of so-called 'civilised' man towards some of the native tribes who are still living pretty much in the stone age. I was in the Aleutians not long ago. There aren't many of the Inungan left - the Russians hunted them for sport, killed a lot of them, a couple of hundred years ago. Almost
wiped them out. Then the people of the Borneo rain forests - there are only two or three hundred of them left because the forest is being felled and they're being forcibly resettled and 'civilised', and they're miserable because of it. They tried to stop the loggers, but since I was there the government made their protests illegal. The only way to stop the felling is make it uneconomical, but you'll always get businessmen who put profit before everything else, and buy the wood - and people buying the wooden products without realising they're made from unsustained forest trees. That's only two examples. I've got plenty more."

If Jim was surprised to see Simon Banks at the lecture, it was nothing to Simon's surprise at seeing Jim. At the end, while Blair spoke to several people who went forward with specific questions they had been too diffident to ask in public, Simon made his way over to his detective.

"I didn't expect to see you here."

"Well, Blair said he needed to be here tonight, and he doesn't have a car." The comment was off-hand, but Simon was aware of... something... in Jim's voice that he had never heard before, and he realized that what he had begun to suspect was indeed the case, that somehow the young observer had found a way through the shell Jim had around around himself when he moved from Vice to Major Crime, a shell that had thickened when Pendergrast disappeared.

The crowd was beginning to disperse slowly... and looking at the platform, the two men realized that Blair had gone.

Abruptly, Jim raised his head. Faint but clear, he could hear Blair's voice.

"Jim! Help!"

There was door beside the platform; Blair must have left by it. Jim raced for it, finding that it opened onto a small hall. He ran through the hall and out another door onto the street - just in time to see a car disappearing down the road that led to Cascade.

He knew beyond any shadow of doubt that Blair was in that car.

"What the hell - ?" Simon stopped beside him.

"I heard Blair calling for help. When I got out here there was a car heading down the road. I know he was in it."

"Heard him?"

Jim took a deep breath. "Look, Captain, this is what we were telling you. He knew I'd hear him if he yelled."

"At that distance? I know you said you'd heightened hearing, but... at that distance?"

"We haven't worked out my full range. That was the truth. But it's more than we said we should tell Chief Warren." He sighed, still staring down the road.

"But who would want to kidnap Blair? And why?" Simon asked.

"He must have gone out willingly, and then discovered he was being tricked," Jim said, "or he'd have yelled sooner."

"But why would he go out with a stranger?"
"I don't - what's that?" Jim strode forward several yards and bent to pick up something. He brought it back to where Simon stood. "It's a wallet." He moved back into the hall, Simon following him, and opened the wallet.

"Some money... a business card - Dr A Bates, Psychology Department, Rainier University."

They looked at each other. "Now was this dropped by the kidnapper... or did Dr Bates lose it earlier today?" Simon asked.

"There's one way to find out. The university can give us Dr Bates' address. Come on, Captain - the caretaker, at least, will still be here."

Blair slowly recovered consciousness and lay motionless, unwilling to let his captor know he was awake.

The man had been one of several people to approach him after the lecture, introducing himself as Tony Bates, Doctor of Psychology at Rainier. As the small crowd around Blair drifted away, Bates said, "I wonder if you would give me your opinion on an artifact I've got - I was given it as a present earlier this year, and it's supposed to be genuine Inuit, a hundred years old or thereabouts, but I'm not sure it's genuine. I've got it in my car - I was meaning to ask Professor Buckner tomorrow what he thought, but after hearing you tonight I suspect you've got more personal experience of the Arctic tribes than he has."

"Well, his field of expertise is Africa," Blair agreed, "though I'm quite sure he knows enough to identify something from anywhere in the world as fake, if it is. But I'll come and have a look, if you want. I'll just let my friend know where I'm going - "

"We can be out to the car and back before you get the chance to reach anyone in this crowd - they're not in any hurry to go home, are they?"

Blair grinned, conceding the point. He was quite flattered that after all his lectures the audience - mostly students but sometimes including some of the general public, people who had read his books - usually delayed, talking about what they had heard.

He followed Bates across the hall and out the door into the car park. Bates stopped at a car and opened the back door; reached in, and as he turned towards Blair he caught Blair's arm. Blair registered the prick of a needle and realized he'd been fooled; he managed to yell, "Jim! Help!" before he felt his balance going. He was only half aware of Bates pushing him into the car, slamming the door, scrambling into the driver's seat and the car starting.

Now he lay on something fairly firm, his hands behind his back, pressure on his wrists, and when he tried to move them found that he couldn't. He was firmly tied.

He opened his eyes. He was lying on a couch that he guessed wasn't the world's most comfortable seat - it was too firm for that - though it made a reasonably comfortable bed. Bates was sitting beside him running a yellow scarf through his fingers.

"Ah, Dr Sandburg, nice of you to join me. I'm afraid your stay will be fairly brief, however."

"You're the serial killer? Lash, Walker, Frasier, Bright... "

"And soon Sandburg."

"But why? You don't know me, you don't even work in the same field."
"Oh, it's nothing to do with that. It's just - your existence offends me, Dr Sandburg. Just as the others did."

"Why?" Blair fought to remain calm.

"Well, first of all you were all born on May 24th. That was my mother's birthday.

"Dr Bates - the real Dr Bates - made the mistake of suggesting that she had made me too dependent on her. He criticised her. I couldn't tolerate that. My mother was perfect, Dr Sandburg. Perfect."

"You're David Lash."

"That's right. I discovered Dr Bates was coming to Rainier from Watsonville, and I left the place just after he did and followed him to Cascade. It was easy to knock him out before he ever arrived at Rainier and take his place. And I know plenty about psychology; I've had plenty psychologists spending time with me, I know the kind of thing they look for.

"He had all his papers with him, and that's when I discovered that he had the same birthday as mother. I really couldn't let him live - he criticised her; but to discover he had the same birthday - that was even more of an insult to her memory. Then I left my wallet on his body, and that identified him as me.

"I'd met Adam Walker at Watsonville, and I knew he had the same birthday too. But he wasn't a nice man at all. He swore and cursed at life, at the driver who crippled him - oh, I couldn't let anyone so full of hate live. Not when he shared mother's birthday.

"Susan Frasier? She was like Ruth Dawson who lived beside us - everything my mother despised in a woman. A woman trying to make a success of doing a job a man should have been given. Mother always believed that a real woman should know her place, shouldn't try to take work from men. After all, men are the breadwinners.

"And Billy Bright. Man, he had talent! But he wasted it. He was happy to play in a third-rate band in a sleazy nightclub, spending all his money on heroin. Mother would never have approved of someone sharing her birthday who wasted his talent the way Bright did.

"As for you... You are illegitimate. No father on record. Mother would certainly not have approved of your existence."

"Like that's my fault?" Blair demanded. "Or even my mother's, if she was raped or the steady boyfriend she trusted walked out the day she told him she was pregnant."

"Even if your mother was raped, she should have had an abortion as soon as she discovered she was pregnant."

"Sure - like you could get abortions on demand in 1969!"

"Mother would not have approved of a bastard sharing her birthday. She always said bastards should be ashamed to show their faces in public."

Blair took a deep breath and remained silent - the only thing he could say to that was a definite criticism of Mrs Lash's views on bastards and abortion. It occurred to him that his opinion of her, formed from the reports, agreed with the comment Lash said Dr Bates - the real Dr Bates - had made; Lash was brainwashed by his mother's attitude.

"Why drown the people you kill?" he asked, after thinking for a few moments.
"Mother didn't approve of bloodshed."

"But 'bloodshed' means killing," Blair said. "Doesn't that mean she didn't approve of killing?"

"You're just trying to muddle me!" Lash exclaimed. "But it won't work. You never knew mother, you're trying to put words into her mouth, you're trying to make me betray her memory - "

"No, I'm not, I'm just suggesting that you might be misunderstanding what she would want you to do."

Lash clutched his head. "No! No, you're just trying to confuse me! I know what she believed, I know what she wanted, what she would have wanted me to do!"

"Would she have wanted to see you becoming a killer?"

"She always wanted to see me upholding what she believed, the morals she upheld. She would be proud - "

He was interrupted by the doorbell. As he hesitated it rang again. He paused to thrust a wad of cloth into Blair's mouth then went to answer it, closing the door behind him.

The tall man at the door was showing no sign of turning away, and Lash knew that answering the door had been the right thing to do. "Can I help you?"

"Dr Bates?"

"Yes."

"I found your wallet last night at Rainier. You must have dropped it in the parking lot."

"Oh - thank you."

"I wonder - did you see anyone in the parking lot last night? We have a report of a missing person."

"No, nobody," Lash said.

Having heard the voices from the street, Jim knew perfectly well that Blair was in the house. He took a step towards Lash. "I think you did."

"Look, Mr - Whoever-you-are - I'm grateful to you for bringing my wallet, but if you don't leave now, I'm calling the police."

Jim's lips twisted into an unamused grin. "I am the police."

In the room behind Lash, Blair finally managed to spit out the cloth and, not knowing who was at the door, yelled, "Help! He wants to kill me! Call the police!"

Lash tried to duck past Jim and run; Jim grabbed his arm. Lash struggled to pull free, and one well-placed punch knocked him out.

Jim grabbed one arm and hauled Lash into the house, not caring if he injured the man in the process. He kicked the door open and drew a long, relieved breath when he saw Blair apparently unhurt.

"Jim! Thank god. He's the killer, Jim."
"I guessed that." He dragged Lash over to where Blair was struggling to sit up. "Turn round."

Blair flopped round, and Jim untied the rope round his wrists, using it to tie Lash. Then he caught Blair's arms, pulling him back to face him. "Are you all right?"

Blair nodded. "I am now, but you have no idea how scared I was. I tried to talk him round, but he's completely insane - he's got to be completely insane."

On the floor beside them, Lash moaned and opened his eyes; Jim looked coldly down at him. "Dr Anthony Bates - "

"No, Jim," Blair said. "He's David Lash. The man identified as Lash was really Dr Bates."

"Ah. David Lash, then. You're under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used... "

It was several hours before Jim and Blair returned to the loft, by which time Blair was shaking with reaction.

Jim settled him on the couch and went to make coffee. "Want to talk about it?" he asked.

Blair shook his head. "You already know what happened. I never thought to doubt another lecturer at Rainier. He must have been laughing his head off at how easy it was to trick me into going outside with him."

"Yeah, I know what happened, but not how you feel about it all. When you were giving your statement, you didn't say anything about how you felt."

"How I felt? Scared. And angry. With a mother like he had, the poor guy never stood a chance. Everything he said - he was either parrotting things she'd said or spouting things he thought she'd have said. He had no thoughts or opinions of his own."

He was silent for a minute, then asked, "What will happen to him?"

"He'll probably be declared unfit to stand trial, and be committed to Conover."

Blair nodded as Jim brought the coffee over to him. "He'll be in good company there - though there are some guys in Conover who make Lash look like a model of sanity."

"What do you know about Conover?"

"I worked there for a while when I was getting material for my dissertation."

"You know, you never fail to amaze me," Jim said. "I always thought academics were soft. You keep giving my misconceptions a hard kick in the butt."

Blair managed a weak grin. He reached for his coffee, and discovered that his hands were shaking so much he had to use both to hold the mug reasonably steady.

"Still think I'm not soft?" he asked wryly.

"Reaction. We all get the shakes occasionally." Jim hesitated, then slipped a comforting arm round Blair. Blair put the mug down and turned to rest his head against Jim's shoulder. "You did all the right things, you know," Jim went on. "You kept your head, tried to talk him down - I heard some of it from the street."
"I wasn't getting anywhere with him, though."

"Maybe not, but if you'd panicked he'd probably have killed you before I had time to get there."
The comforting hug suddenly turned into a fierce embrace. "I don't know what I'd have done if I'd been too late."

Blair raised his head to look into Jim's face, and smiled. Jim gave an inarticulate growl, and pulled Blair into a desperate kiss that slowly gentled as Blair responded willingly, turning into a demonstration of affection that at first surprised them both and then seemed absolutely natural.

Jim reached down to Blair's groin and was unsurprised to feel the hardness of an erection; he unzipped Blair's pants and slipped his hand in, to curl it round Blair's cock.

"Yes!" Blair gasped. "Please, Jim."

It took only a few moments before Blair reached climax, and he relaxed against Jim for a minute. At last he said, "What about you?"

"I came when you did."

"Oh." He was carefully not looking at Jim, and after another minute tried to pull free.

"It's all right." Jim let him sit up.

"I don't know what came over me there."

"I do. It's a natural reaction. I've seen it often after a dangerous op. It doesn't mean we're gay, just that we're good enough friends to help each other out when it's needed."

"Oh."

"If you want, you can sleep with me tonight - if you think you might have nightmares about Lash."

Blair considered it for a moment. "It might be a good idea," he agreed.

"Now you finish your coffee while I get a meal ready."

Jim was finally remembering exactly what it had been like when he was with the Chopek, and the relationship he had had with Incacha, his helper in those days. It was beginning to look as if he was developing the same relationship with Blair.

He could take his time. He didn't need to rush things.

He was smiling to himself as he went into the kitchen.

End The Observer by Bluewolf: bluewolf@bluewolfen.co.uk
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