

BROTHERS

a *Shadow Chasers/Sentinel* whimsy

by Sheila Paulson

"One man in a thousand, Solomon says
Will stick more close than a brother."

Kipling. *The Thousandth Man*

"Superman. Thass wha' you are."

Blair Sandburg froze, his eyes seeking out Jim Ellison in the milling crowd of cops, reporters, eyewitnesses, and rubbernecks. The look on his face was exactly that of a deer caught in the headlights.

Beside Blair, Captain Simon Banks growled, "Damn it," and started toward Jim. The reporters hadn't heard it, had they? In perfect unison, Blair and Simon joined Jim, pinning the old wino beside him between them.

"X-ray eyes," muttered the old man. His hand came out of his pocket with a cheap bottle of wine and he unscrewed the cap and took a long, gurgling sip before he lowered it. With the back of his gloved hand, he wiped off his mouth. "Shuper hearing. Thish's great!"

"What's he talking about, Jim?" Blair asked for Jim's ears alone.

"He's drunk," said Jim. This wasn't good. Ellison had this way of clenching his jaw and grinding his teeth. It was a wonder his molars weren't all ground down to stubs.

"Saw the guy wi' th' gun," said the wino. He was in his late fifties and his last bath must have been a vague and distant memory. He reeked. But his voice was shrill and, any second now, one of the reporters was going to hear what he was claiming. Most of them would write it off, but maybe it was a slow news night.

"Heard 'im, too," the guy said. "Hidin' behin' a shtack a crates, and Shuperman here got the jump on him anyhow."

Two patrolmen manhandled the bank robber into the back of a squad car and another tagged the bank bag as evidence. Blair let his eyes rove around the night scene. How did all these people get here so fast? Maybe they had police scanners. The press did. Yesterday's robbery of the First Bank of Cascade had led off this morning's news. Any minute now, the press would be all over Jim, bellowing questions Jim wouldn't want to answer. His enhanced senses had to stay a secret, or he'd be in all kinds of trouble.

What do I do? Blair glanced around wildly. There had to be a way out.

He squatted down in front of the wino. "Hey, man, you saw Superman? Red cape and all? Blue tights?"

Blurry eyes squinted at him from under a barricade of hairy brows. "Whazzat you shay, shonny?"

"He can't be Superman," Blair insisted. "He hasn't got a superman costume. Look." He stabbed a finger in Jim's direction. The rough-and-tumble fight through the crates in the warehouse had ripped Jim's shirt open, revealing his bare chest. That lady reporter over there had been ogling him since she got here. "See? No tights under his clothes. You've got it wrong, man."

The wino squinted at Jim, then he blinked, rubbed his eyes again, and stood up. He was so drunk he nearly toppled over again, and Blair had to catch his arm to stop his fall. The tattered overcoat was greasy under the anthropologist's fingers.

"Superman," bellowed the wino. "Came flyin' in, knocked that guy's block off, lemme tell ya. Saw him flyin' up there. Know what he shtands for, shonny? Truth, justice, 'n the 'merican way." He pulled away from Blair's supporting hand and sketched a rough salute. "God blesh 'merica."

Jim's jaw eased. When the wino started singing *America the Beautiful* at the top of his lungs, the reporters

exchanged disgusted glances and backed away. Simon favored Blair with an approving look. That was one for the record books. Simon wasn't exactly lavish with praise for the Police Observer.

"Stand back, everybody, it's all over," he said.

"Can we get a statement, Captain?" It was the reporter from the Cascade Times. Breckenridge or something like that.

"We've apprehended the man who robbed the First Bank of Cascade," Simon announced. "Acting on a tip, Detective Ellison was able to track him down to this warehouse."

"Shaw the whole thing," bawled the wino. "Superman. Tights 'n all. 'mazin' thing."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but this was entirely a police operation," Simon said. "We didn't have the assistance of Superman or anyone not connected with the police department."

"Truth, justice, 'merican way," said the wino stubbornly. "Superman."

The reporters laughed and pestered Banks for the robber's identity.

"We'll have a statement in the morning," Banks promised. "No further comments until then."

When the reporters gave ground, Blair heaved a huge, relieved sigh. Now, if they could just get out of here before someone decided to question the wino. He slipped a five out of his pocket and passed it to the wino, careful to let no one see him doing it. "You earned a drink, pal," he whispered.

The wino snapped the bill between his hands then, delighted, thrust it into his pocket and staggered away between two warehouses toward the next street.

When Blair turned back, most of the crowd had vanished and Simon was fending off a persistent TV reporter. Jim caught Blair's eye.

"Thanks, Chief."

Blair grinned. "I think it worked. That was *close*, Jim."

"Too close." Ellison's eyes were hard but the anger that burned in them wasn't meant for Sandburg but for the circumstances that had turned his life upside down when his senses had grown heightened. He could use them to save lives and to be the best cop in Major Crimes, but it had turned his life upside down. Blair hoped he could keep picking up the pieces. It was a full-time job, being a Sentinel's guide.

"You want to track down *what*?" Jonathan MacKensie set aside the weighty tome he'd been studying and looked across the table at his shadow chasing partner, Edgar Benedek. Doing anthropological research in the Georgetown Institute library while Benedek worked on his dissertation was not as much a study opportunity as a chance of weird distraction because Benedek had a tendency to comment on his material, to notice female students passing by, to expound on weird theories about the lost continent of Atlantis, or to plan dates for the weekend. Expecting the former tabloid journalist to 'clean up his act' just because he was working on his doctorate had been a mistake.

"A superhero," Benedek said as if nothing could be more likely. "Come on, Jack, I've got all the material I'm going to find in here." He poked an even more weighty tome than Jonathan's entitled *Tobin's Spirit Guide*. Closing it took both hands. He put aside the portable tape recorder he'd been using for dictation, much to the annoyance of people at nearby tables, and grinned brightly. "It needs to gel before I start writing it up. What say to a weekend in the gorgeous Pacific Northwest?"

"Why can't you ever find your mystic whatsises right here in Georgetown?" Jonathan complained. Benny, although ever-so-slightly toned down from his tabloid journalist days, was still a 'wild and crazy guy' who was prepared to spring into the fray at the slightest hint of paranormal activity a continent away. Used to him now, Dr. Moorhouse, the department head, usually went along with his theories unless they were too far off base even for her.

"I call 'em where I see 'em," Benedek said. "Come on, Jon-jon. You'd think after all these years you'd be

more excited about a new case."

"But a *superhero*?" Jonathan wailed, moderating his voice when several hissed shushes from nearby tables recalled him to proper decorum. "I suppose he flies around in tights and cape?"

"Are you kidding, buds? It's the 90's."

"That Lois and Clark show you like was on in the 90s. What happened? Did you see a rerun of it last night?"

"No, I didn't see a rerun. But I've got contacts all over the place. One of them called me and told me about the superhero."

Jonathan's head sagged, then he surrendered. "Let's go before we incur the head librarian's wrath," he said. "You can tell me about it over lunch. Your treat."

"Sure, why not," Benedek agreed so easily that Jonathan shuddered. They'd probably have to go to one of those weird restaurants his friend favored. "Then I'll tell you all about the superhero." He lugged *Tobin's Spirit Guide* back to its place on the shelf. "Gotta get me a copy of this..." Jonathan had a feeling he was not enjoy the story any more than he'd enjoy the meal.

"No, he doesn't fly," the grad student said reluctantly. "This is something even better. Have you ever heard of Sentinels, Jonny?"

Jonathan looked at his plate and shuddered. His meal resembled tree bark and anchovies in a vivid orange sauce. He prodded it warily with his fork, half afraid it would prod back. When it simply lay there, he looked up. "Sentinels? I know the meaning of the word, but I don't understand..."

"Should have thought it would be right up your alley. Primitive man, tribal guardians. Anthro to the max."

Jonathan's jaw dropped. "The Burton theory. It's not real, Benedek. As far as I know, no one believes it. No, come to think of it, there's a grad student out somewhere on the west coast who's into it. I met him at that conference in Sacramento last year. He said he'd found people with one or two heightened senses, mostly vision and hearing. Since abnormally good vision and hearing are not impossible, I didn't believe he had proof. You're being hoaxed, Benedek. It's ludicrous. Sir Richard Burton came up with this theory--"

"In between marrying Liz Taylor?" Benedek's eyes sparkled.

"I don't mean the actor."

"No, you mean the 19th Century explorer." Benny grinned to prove he'd been kidding all along. "Know about him. I could tell you stories..."

"If that's what your 'superhero' is, a Sentinel, then you're way off base." Jonathan took a cautious bite. Actually, it didn't taste too bad, but it would never do to allow Benedek to realize that. With a counterfeit grimace, he continued, "He wouldn't have super powers, only enhanced sensory abilities."

"X-ray vision, super hearing," Benedek enumerated, checking them off on his fingers.

"It's hardly the same thing. I can't believe you want to go all the way to Washington State to look for someone who can hear conversations across the street or read signs from three blocks away. Isn't that a let down from your usual claims?"

Benedek didn't appear daunted. "Come on, Jack, it's more than that. It's gotta be. My source says this guy is a cop. Can you imagine how he can use it to bust the bad guys?"

Jonathan poked at the dinner and took another bite. It was actually beginning to taste good.

Benedek arched a knowing eyebrow. Instead of rubbing it in, he administered the *coup de grace*. "Come on, Dr. Jon, this is anthropology. Your field, for a change. Aren't you even curious?"

"As curious as I was when you said Julius Caesar was in Idaho," Jonathan said. "You nearly died on that

one, remember?"

"Oh, low blow, Jack." He assumed a mournful gaze then brightened. "Are you kidding? My out-of-body extravaganza got me a full round on the talk shows and the *Register* had record sales."

"Don't even *think* of staging a repeat performance." Jonathan did recalled the incident without fondness; sitting in the waiting room believing Benedek was dying was one of his nastiest memories.

"Repeat myself? Not when there are whole new ways to amaze and astonish the world." Benedek waggled his brows. "Come on, Jonny, it's only a harmless trip to Cascade, Washington. What's the harm?"

"I'm sure by the time this is over I'll be able to list the harm in a nice, neat outline in descending order," Jonathan groaned. It was a scam. It had to be. But if it weren't...

"Come on, Jim, it's okay. Nobody believed the guy." Blair Sandburg essayed an encouraging grin as he put away the last of the breakfast dishes. "So this guy babbled that you had super vision. Everybody wrote him off as a drunk. If anybody had taken him seriously there'd be reporters beating a path to our door, man"

Jim Ellison halfway conceded the point. "Okay, so he was a wino. What if, next time, it isn't? Don't you get it, Sandburg? I'm hanging out to dry here. Somebody could figure out I'm a Sentinel. You're all excited about what I can do--but I'm the one who'll have to live with it if I wind up in the headlines. People out there could grab me and make me vanish. I'd either be somebody's trick pony or I'd be a lab experiment."

Blair heaved a soft sigh. He'd been so careful since he realized he had a full Sentinel to study. Greatest research subject he'd ever had--except that, somewhere along the line, Jim had stopped being a research subject and turned into his best friend. In the beginning, he'd wanted to keep the secret so he could spring it on the world and put his name in the annals of great anthropologists. Now he wanted to keep it secret to protect his buddy. There had to be a way to make his dissertation work and still disguise Jim's identity, but he hadn't thought of one. Soon, he'd finish writing it and it would be major decision time. He couldn't risk Jim's life. But where to go with his own if he failed to complete his dissertation?

Much as he loved academia, he found it a real kick to be a kind of policeman. Okay, so a police observer wasn't the same as a real cop, but he'd had people shooting at him. He'd even been shot and needed to be airlifted out--the chopper ride from hell. Jim had rescued him, and he'd even rescued himself. Cutting the hole out of that elevator floor and dropping the bomb down the shaft stuck in his memory. It still bugged him a little to get into an elevator, but Jim knew it. Jim watched out for him. That meant he had to watch out for Jim.

"I know they're lousy options," he soothed. "But I won't give you away and Simon won't either. Nobody else has a clue. I keep my eyes open all the time. That wino could have been bad but he got carried away. Once he started babbling about the cape and tights, his credibility was shot to hell."

Jim's eyes held approval. "You suggested it to him."

"It was *great*, Jim. I loved it when he started sipping. After that, everybody thought he'd seen what he'd seen through the bottom of his bottle." He rocked on his toes. "Nobody in his right mind would buy into his story."

Somebody knocked on the door.

Jim went to answer it. A lot of the time, Jim toned down his senses to 'normal' so that they didn't overwhelm him, but he had it fine-tuned to be aware of sounds outside the norm. He opened the door without hesitation, which meant he'd heard nothing surreptitious or abnormal.

Two men stood at the door, one of them wearing a garish Hawaiian shirt and jeans and the other clad in a more conventional suit. Blair's mouth dropped open as he recognized the suit guy.

"Dr. MacKensie," he cried in astonishment. When he'd met the anthropologist from Georgetown Institute last year, he was certain MacKensie had written him off as a crackpot. He was surprised the older man had looked him up. "Jim, this is Dr. Jonathan MacKensie from Georgetown University. He's a famous anthropologist. Dr. MacKensie, this is my friend, Jim Ellison."

MacKensie shook hands with both of them and then turned to introduce them to his colleague. "This is

Blair Sandburg," he started. Something flashed in the eyes of the guy in the gaudy clothes. Recognition?

"Hi, I'm Edgar Benedek," Hawaiian shirt introduced himself. "The other half of Georgetown's Paranormal Investigations unit." *Paranormal Investigations*? Sandburg had a really bad feeling about this. He couldn't recall MacKensie mentioning anything about Ghostbusting when they'd talked.

Benedek stuck out a friendly hand to Jim. "You must be the Sentinel."

Benedek? Blair frowned. He knew that name from somewhere. Then the man's words registered and his mouth fell open in sheer horror. He hadn't even hinted to Dr. MacKensie that he'd found a full Sentinel. He'd told MacKensie what he'd told Jim at first, that he'd found a lot of people with one heightened sense and a few with two. MacKensie couldn't have interpreted that to mean Blair knew a full Sentinel.

"I'm sorry, the what?" Jim said, his face carefully blank. That muscle bunched in his jaw.

"I tried to stop him, Sandburg," MacKensie said. "I assured him that this was all theoretical. He grabs a bone and runs with it. It comes of being a reporter."

"Reporter?" Blair snapped his fingers. "I know. You're the guy who writes those paranormal stories for the *National Register*." The name still sounded familiar beyond that, but this was hardly the time to chase an elusive memory.

Jim's jaw tightened to the headache stage. "A tabloid journalist?" he said in a cold voice. *Not good, not good*.

"Not these days," Benedek said with a dismissive gesture. "I'm like you, Sandburg. Grad student working on my dissertation. Soon to be the esteemed Dr. Benedek of the Georgetown Institute."

"Not on this Sentinel thing?" Jim asked, trying so hard to sound normal. "That's Sandburg's gig. He trails all over the place looking for people with hyper vision and hearing. You don't think *I'm* one?" He produced the astonishment so well that Jonathan MacKensie turned an exasperated glare at his friend.

Benedek rocked on his toes. "Got a tip, Ellison."

Blair snapped his fingers. "Hey, Jim, I know what this is. That wino who made all those ridiculous claims. Everybody wrote that off. You guys had a long trip for nothing."

Benedek shook his head. "No way, Jose. Here we've got the world's leading expert on Sentinels. That's you," he said, stabbing his finger at Sandburg. "And then we've got a claim that Ellison is a Sentinel--and what do we find, that he's right here, sharing an apartment with the expert. Now maybe that's a coincidence, but in my book, that kind of coincidence doesn't happen."

"Well, in this case it *is* a coincidence," Blair said quickly. "Jim's a very good cop. Everybody laughed the wino off. He was so drunk he couldn't see straight anyway. He was talking about somebody flying and wearing a Superman suit and then he started ranting about truth, justice and the American way and singing patriotic songs."

Jonathan MacKensie threw a dirty look at his buddy. "I think I see where your idea came from, Benedek," he murmured. "You were talking superheroes before we came out here."

MacKensie had been the skeptical type, but it wouldn't take more than a few minutes' thought to put two and two together or to accept Benedek's rationale--unless he didn't *want* to buy into Benedek's theory. That might help, but he was too good a scientist to shoot down a theory when there was evidence that it was real. Okay, so it was a coincidence that the 'world's leading Sentinel expert' was sharing an apartment with the potential Sentinel. Blair might be able to appeal to MacKensie's better nature but he was pretty sure a tabloid journalist wouldn't have one. Benedek? *Why* did that name sound so familiar? And it wasn't just from the articles. He remembered seeing a write-up about Bigfoot the reporter had done years ago and the name ringing a distant bell. Not a common name, Benedek.

So he threw in the red herring. "Benedek, I know your name from somewhere. Not from your articles either. From a long time ago. Only I can't remember where, man."

Jim looked at him in surprise, glad of the momentary reprieve.

Benedek frowned. "Never met you, kid. I'd've remembered the hair."

"I'm sure he wasn't *born* with long hair," Jim threw in.

"Come on, Jim," Blair protested with a grin. "Are you kidding. I've always had it. Mom said it was an expression of self, a way to stand out against the establishment."

"We have a little hippie here?" Benedek asked. For an instant, something dark flashed in his eyes. Was it a memory of a prior meeting that Blair had forgotten?

MacKensie stared at him, too. He hadn't expected that reaction.

"That's what they thought at the precinct," Jim put in. "Sandburg works with me in Major Crimes. He's doing research on the outsider in a closed society. He's infiltrated primitive tribes, and now he's trying a more modern one. That's why we know each other, not because of this Sentinel stuff he's so hung up on."

"He *has* lived with primitive tribes," MacKensie confirmed. "When we met last year at that conference, he and I talked about it. I'm a physical anthropologist and he's a cultural anthropologist, but sometimes they overlap."

"Jonathan's a bone man," Sandburg said. "Primitive man, pre-man, cave man, the older the better. Give him a few really ancient bones and you'll make his day. Wants to be the next Leakey. His dad won the Nobel Prize, Jim. Isn't that awesome." The hero worship he felt for a more advanced colleague rang in his voice. Jonathan produced a stiff little smile and Jim produced more jaw clenchedings. Great. That wasn't helping.

MacKensie cut in quickly. "The Sentinel thing is my fault, Blair. When Benedek told me about the 'superhero' claim, I remembered what you'd said at the conference and told Benedek he was talking about the Sentinel concept."

Blair sent up a futile prayer to Fate for rescue. Jim was going to blow up at him the second these two left, and he'd be right. Rescue came in the form of an old, old memory that suddenly crystalized. "It wasn't *Edgar* Benedek," he blurted in surprise. "It was *Eddie*. Is that you?"

"Big Eddie was my old man." Benedek's eyes narrowed in surprise--and another, darker emotion. "I never once went by Eddie or even Ed. I go by Benny. Edgar's for the press." He glanced sideways at MacKensie.

"I've never heard him called 'Eddie' either," MacKensie confirmed. "Well, once I ran into a con man who knew his father, and he called them 'Big Eddie' and 'Little Eddie'."¹

"Yeah, when I was twelve," said Benedek. "Pop was always Eddie." His mouth curled slightly. "I was Benny, even back then, except to a few of Pop's cronies. So, you knew my pop?"

Blair shook his head. "I don't remember ever meeting him. It's just the name, coming from somewhere in my subconscious." This was good. He was distracting Benedek from the Sentinel issue, and that had to help Jim. Benedek might be too pugnacious to let it go entirely but the longer Blair stalled the more time Jim had to think of explanations. Would the reporter back off if Jim claimed one heightened sense? It was hardly a story if someone had excellent vision.

"Sandburg?" Benedek mused. Then his face tightened up. "No, never ran into a Sandburg." End of the subject. If only Blair wasn't so convinced he was lying...

"Well, I can't say the reunion has been great," Jim put in, "but I've got to go to work and Sandburg has to be at the university this morning, so we'll have to end it for now." He gestured meaningfully at the door.

"Of course. I understand," MacKensie agreed. "Blair, I'd like to come to the university, visit the anthropology department. Nothing about this Sentinel issue, you understand."

Unable to think of a good reason for denying the request, Blair cast a sideways look at Benedek. He couldn't remember where he'd heard the name 'Eddie Benedek'. Maybe something in the old memory could suppress Benedek's journalistic instincts. If he was really working on his dissertation, he probably wasn't writing for the *National Register* any longer. Blair hoped not. The last thing in the world Jim needed to headline in the tabloids.

"Sure, come to the university," he told MacKensie.

"I'll stop by later," MacKensie said and steered Benedek to the door. "I'm sorry we bothered you."

¹ The Luck of the Clan MacKensie, *Compadres* 15

The minute the door closed behind them, Jim whirled and glared. "Damn it, Sandburg..."

"Jim, I never told MacKensie about you. I swear it, man. I never said I'd found a full Sentinel. It was just theoretical. I didn't know he knew a reporter, and he thought everything I was telling him was a crock. You *know* I wouldn't give you away."

Ellison's anger eased. "Yeah, Chief, I do know. For all the good it does us. I'm sorry. I don't trust that Benedek guy. You can bet he'll still write up a good story if he can fabricate one."

"Maybe not, Jim. Believe me, I know what it takes to get a doctorate. Tabloid stories won't impress the powers that be. If he publishes, he could risk blowing off his Ph.D."

"Not if it's true."

"He can't *prove* it, and even if he could, the *National Register* is *not* one of the places you choose when you're up against the 'publish or perish' mentality at any accredited university. If he splatters you all over the front page of the *Register*, he risks losing academic credibility. You walk a fine line when you go for the doctorate. Once he's got tenure, he'd be a lot freer but he can't take the chance now. Okay, he could write it up for a prestigious journal, but the odds are they wouldn't take it. Or he can write it up for his 'Paranormal Investigations' unit, but we both know there's nothing paranormal about..." His voice trailed off. Seeing spirit animals might slide over onto the paranormal side, but that part was a dark secret. "Being a Sentinel is genetic, the way some people have red hair or are twins. It's nothing to do with ghosts and UFO's and table tilting."

"You think that matters if a hot-shot tabloid reporter splatters it around? There's always *somebody* who'll buy into it."

A few crackpot theories might mean nothing, but there were people who could take the clues and run with them. "I really don't think he can print it and still get his doctorate. We'll just have to be really careful, man, and I'll overload MacKensie with my experiences with primitive tribes and try to distract him. He might believe it's all true, but I don't think he'd do anything about it."

"What about this paranormal gig of his?"

"I think it was wished on him. Universities dump jobs and projects on us that we don't want to do but can't get out of. Like when I was Alec's advisor. I swear, Jim, I'll do everything I can to put this right."

Ellison looked at him long and hard and his tension eased. "I know, Chief. I don't believe it's your fault. It's just really rotten timing."

"Treat it like it's a big joke, man, and maybe it'll go away." He had to find a way to make it disappear. "I wish I knew where I heard of Benedek's father. That bugs me."

"Sounds like he might be a con man. Ever get conned, Sandburg?"

"No, this was years ago. I'm sure I heard of the guy when I was just a kid, but I can't remember where. Maybe I should ask my mom."

"Benedek did have a weird reaction when he mentioned hippies," Jim said.

"Okay, I'll call Naomi. Then I've gotta get out to the university or I'll be late for my first class."

"I'll head for major crimes," Jim decided. "You'll be by for lunch?"

Blair nodded. He waved as Jim grabbed his jacket and departed then he sagged back in his chair. Jim was still tense, still unhappy. He didn't blame Blair, but that wouldn't matter if he were exposed. Even if it were no one's fault, his secret would come out and that would mean trouble.

For once, Blair was able to track down his mother without much effort; the second call found her. "Blair, sweetie. What's up?"

"I can't just call without something being up?" he kidded.

"You can, but not when you sound like that. Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just something that came up. Mom, did you ever know someone named Eddie Benedek?"

There was a pregnant pause at the other end of the line. "Mom?" he prodded, unexpected tension

twisting his stomach.

"I'm here." She hesitated. "I did know him once before you were born. You never met him. Maybe you heard me talking about him to Uncle Ralph at a family get-together when you were little."

"So, who is he? Why would the name stick? The reason I asked is, his son--"

"His *son*?" Naomi's voice rose to a shriek. "Little Eddie? You must mean Little Eddie."

"He goes by Benny nowadays," Blair said. "I met him today. Mom, he got really weird at the mention of hippies, and I've got this strange feeling about the name. What's it about?"

"I never met Little Eddie," Naomi said. "I didn't even know he existed at first. He lived with his grandmother. How did you meet Little Eddie?"

"He came here with an anthropologist I know. They work together at Georgetown University."

"But Little Eddie is a tabloid reporter."

Weird. Naomi had never met Benedek but she knew what he did for a living? "He's working on a doctorate at Georgetown now, but he used to be a tabloid reporter."

"A *doctorate*?"

"Big Eddie was one of your men, wasn't he?" That would explain a lot. If Naomi had known him before Blair was born, Uncle Ralph might have met him. He and Mom stayed in touch when they could.

"Yes, briefly," she said. "I didn't realize at first that he was...not particularly honest. I was against the establishment but he was shady. He was good at hiding it, good at being charming. I finally realized I couldn't trust him. He was ripping people off, cheating them. I broke it off with him, and I never saw him again." Her voice quivered.

"Mom? Are you okay?" The sudden, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach intensified. "What are you saying here?"

She made an odd, choked sound, almost a sob. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry. I hoped you'd never have to know."

The sick feeling expanded. "Mom..."

"Right after he was gone," she said in a voice that rang like the knell of doom, "I found out I was pregnant. I tried to tell myself, over and over, that it didn't have to be him. I wasn't with him that long; there was a slim chance it could have been... I always said that I wasn't quite sure, that's why I couldn't tell you. But I'm really afraid that Big Eddie Benedek was your father."

That was it, the thing Blair didn't want to hear. The image of Benedek rose up in his mind. They didn't resemble each other, but the blue eyes were the exact same shade. Like Blair, he was slightly built. Or could it be that MacKensie was a tall man and Benedek had seemed short in comparison?

"Blair? Are you still there?"

"I'm just taking it in," he said, trying really hard to keep his voice from wobbling. "I always hoped it would have been somebody like Jimi Hendrix or Jerry Garcia. Now you say he was a con man. Mom? Is he still alive?"

"I--I'm almost positive he died."

So there was no chance to meet him. No chance to reconcile with him. No chance to find out if it were true, to look the man in the eye and seek out a resemblance. Blair looked a lot like Naomi's side of the family. He might not take after his dad at all. He hoped he didn't. A con man...

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry. If he'd been a good man, I would have told you long ago. I honestly couldn't be sure, at least not 100%. Maybe 95%."

Blair wasn't sure what else to say. "Mom...I'm going to go now. I have to think about it. I..."

"Oh, baby, I'll call you tonight. Do you want me to come?"

"No--not yet. Let me think about it, okay?"

She agreed, although he could hear the reluctance in her voice. He hung up and sat clutching the receiver, his stomach twisted into a huge knot. He didn't need this. He didn't want it. It was the end of all his hopes. Yet he should have known that if Naomi could have been proud of his father she would have found a way to let him know. Instead, she had given him a dream, an illusion, a mystery. He'd gotten a kick out of the possibilities, enjoyed most of his temporary fathers. Why couldn't his old man have been Jed Stone, the man Naomi had lived with when he was fourteen? Jed was the perfect father. He was the only one Blair had ever wanted Naomi to marry. He and Jed still exchanged Christmas cards. Instead he had a sleazy con man who had probably conned Naomi. How much of Big Eddie Benedek was in him?

He pulled himself together because he had classes, but he walked through the morning in a daze. Dr. MacKensie showed up alone around eleven. If he thought Blair was stiff and uncomfortable he didn't say so.

"Blair, I am genuinely sorry. When Benedek brought up his 'superman' theory I only came along because he needs me to keep him out of trouble. I never dreamed it would turn out like this."

They were in Blair's office, the door shut. "He's going to make trouble for Jim, isn't he?" Sandburg asked. "Tell everybody he's actually a Sentinel? Do you know what kind of trouble that could cause?"

"Benedek still has the journalist mentality. If he prints such a story, he'll put his doctorate in jeopardy. I must keep reminding him of that. There are those at Georgetown who would love to see him fail. Benedek is wonderfully inventive and essentially a brilliant man who never had the opportunity to get into the academic mindset. He can be annoying, but in a crisis there is no one I would rather have at my back. He's saved my life more than once."

"With your Ghostbusting gig?" Blair tried hard to distract himself. "I didn't realize you did that. Do you know the Ghostbusters?"

Jonathan grimaced. "Unfortunately."

Blair grinned. "Jim and I met them a year or so ago. We had an encounter with Bigfoot that turned out to be a professor in a furry costume. Some drug dealers got mixed up in it.² I think the Ghostbusters are great guys. I like them."

"Oh, I agree, but that Dr. Venkman..." Jonathan shook his head and changed the subject. "Even if Jim Ellison is a full Sentinel, I don't intend to give him away. I would guess he perhaps has a heightened sense, maybe two, which is how you met him, and you got into the closed society research from there. You don't have to admit that. I'll handle Benedek."

"Where is he?" Blair asked with difficulty. His half-brother...

"He got a lead on some haunted houses here in Cascade and went out to converse with the spirits."

"He's not really checking out Jim, is he?"

"Not to my knowledge. Did you really know his name or were you just stalling?"

"I knew his father's name," Blair said tightly.

"I never met his father," Jonathan said. "I once met a man who knew him--oddly enough, it was Dr. Venkman's father. Benedek once told me how he won his father's watch, playing poker with him. I...it gave me more insight into the man. Yet I never met a man with more loyal friends than Edgar Benedek, and that says something for his character. Of course they're wildly eccentric friends, but they'd do anything for him. Once, when I believed Benedek had been buried alive, his editor at the *Register* came out with me in the middle of the night and helped me dig up the grave."

Blair felt his eyes bulging. "Dig up the *grave*?"

"The casket was empty. He'd faked his death for the sake of a story. Without warning me. I was told flat out that he was dead." He hesitated. "It's at moments such as those that you realize whether or not someone matters."

Blair tried to imagine how he would feel if he were told Jim was dead. He shivered. Jim was a cop. It

² *Legends, Compadres 12*

could happen. "If Benedek endangers Jim with this Sentinel claim, it could risk Jim's life," he blurted out. "You have to stop Benedek. Jim's not a paranormal investigator. He's out there in the front lines every day. Don't risk him, Dr. MacKensie."

Jonathan nodded. "I'll do my best. I won't even ask you for confirmation. I would like to meet some of the people in your department, though."

"I'll take you to Mallory. He's our bone man. I bet you'll like him. Anyway, I have to get over to major crimes. I'm meeting Jim for lunch."

"A Sentinel's guide?" MacKensie shook his head. "No, scratch that. I didn't mean to say it. And I will *not* say it to Benedek. His quest for a story could endanger a good man." He hesitated. "I would like to talk with you longer, though. Could we meet for dinner? Would Detective Ellison go for that?"

"Maybe. Would Benedek be there?"

"I think his seeing Jim Ellison act normally would be good. The only problem is that Benedek has this thing for really bizarre foods. Health things, and strange parts of weird animals--what's the matter?"

Blair winced. It had to be a coincidence. "I tend to go with a health food diet, too. Jim hates it." He shrugged. "I'll ask Jim if he's up for dinner. If not, maybe you and I could go." He wasn't sure he wanted to see Benedek again. It wasn't true. It couldn't be. Eddie Benedek had married Benny's mother. Of course Naomi wouldn't have married someone she didn't respect... But in a way, it hurt.

When Sandburg walked into the bullpen at Major Crimes, Jim Ellison glanced up automatically. He was talking on the phone, scribbling notes on a pad at his desk, but his eyes focused on Sandburg, then narrowed. He ended his conversation hastily, and beckoned the anthro student over. "What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing's wrong."

"Is it Benedek?" Jim's eyes narrowed. "Has he caused trouble?"

"I haven't seen him. Dr. MacKensie said he went to look at haunted houses."

"Something's wrong. I can tell." He lowered his voice. "Your heart's going a mile a minute and your respiration... What happened?"

He should have known Jim would guess something was wrong. He couldn't even imagine not telling him about it. But not here. "Jim, can we go home? Have lunch there?"

Jim glanced at his watch. "I honestly can't, Sandburg. There isn't time. But we can grab a burger and eat it in the truck."

Blair waited until they had food from a take out place and the truck was parked overlooking the waterfront. Jim unwrapped his burger and started to eat, but Blair held the partly wrapped soy burger and stared out across the water. "I found out why the name Big Eddie Benedek is familiar, Jim," he said without taking his eyes from the distant vista. At the horizon, a tanker was outlined against the sky.

"Why is that, Chief?" Jim's voice softened. He took another bite of his burger.

"I think the odds are good that he was my father."

Jim hadn't expected that. He nearly spilled his burger into his lap. A piece of tomato did slip out and he grabbed it in midair. "Your *father*?" he cried in the same horrified tones Princess Leia had used when Luke Skywalker had confessed his relationship to Darth Vader. He put the tomato back, studying Blair out of the corner of his eye.

"Naomi said she was about 95% sure of it. She broke it off with him when she found out he was a con man, and she never told me because she didn't respect the guy. I think she felt a little guilty." He heaved a shaky sigh. "God, Jim, I can't take it. I always thought he'd be something special but now I find out he was a crook, and the guy causing you trouble is my *half-brother*. Oh, man, I can't do *anything* right."

Jim put his hand on Sandburg's shoulder. "How is any of this *your* fault, Chief? You didn't choose your father, and this guy might be biologically related to you but you don't owe him and he doesn't owe you. You're what you are and what Naomi helped make you. You are not a con man or a crook. That kind of thing isn't hereditary, anyway." He hesitated. "Are you mad at Naomi?"

Blair tore his eyes from the tanker. "She dumped him when she realized what he was like," he said. "No, I don't blame her. I don't even blame her for not telling me. I should have let it go, but I kept hoping it would be a way to get Benedek off your back." He grimaced. "I can't tell him." He didn't want Edgar Benedek to know. He might not have even told Jim if the reporter thing wasn't hanging over his head.

"You don't have to," Jim soothed, crumpling up his french fries bag. "Look, Chief, lots of people have crummy fathers..."

Blair realized with a shock that Jim was speaking of his own. He'd just recently met William Ellison and, from the little Jim had let drop during that particular case and from the time they'd encountered Jim's brother, Blair was pretty sure the Ellison household hadn't been a happy one.

"Jim, at least your dad meant well."

Jim's voice stiffened. "Didn't feel like it at the time."

"Sorry, man," Blair said hastily. "I don't know what I'm going on about. My father is the same person he always was, and knowing a name doesn't make any difference." It did, but he'd have to get over it.

Jim softened. "I'm sorry, too. I know this must be tough. We'll get through it and this deal with the reporter, too. We'll get through this stupid dinner tonight and if you want to see this Benny guy after that, it'll be up to you."

Blair felt a lot better. Not good yet but maybe that would come. Weird to think Benedek might be his half-brother. But the guy could hardly be family. Blair didn't know how that would play out; it might be best to pretend he didn't know.

He made an impatient gesture to push the whole thing aside and looked without enthusiasm at the soy burger in his hand. He shoved it back into the bag. "I guess I'm not very hungry, Jim. Maybe we could go back now."

Jim turned the key in the ignition. "You want to go through with this dinner?"

Blair shrugged. "I do want to talk to Dr. MacKensie. I cut him off pretty quick this morning, and he's a decent guy. Okay, Jim, I can live with one dinner. Besides, we need to make sure that Benny won't make up weird stories about you. You turn every sense down as low as it'll go and we'll get through it together."

"You called that one, Chief. Okay. We'll do it." He pulled out into traffic.

Blair could tell from his voice that Jim wouldn't enjoy it any more than he would.

Haunted houses in Cascade, Washington were few and far between. Most were fakes, or they had the classic apparition that appeared at midnight every second Tuesday and walked down a hall without noticing the residents. People learned to live with those kinds of apparitions, the kind the Ghostbusters called 'fixed repeaters'. They weren't conscious ghosts so much as a recording made on the fabric of time, playing back when the conditions that existed at the time of their deaths were repeated. Benny had seen enough of that kind to find them boring. Unless a really super story of greed and betrayal or lost love went with them that his readers would eat up, they weren't worth his time.

These days, he didn't write up many stories for the *Register*. Dr. Moorhouse was the head of the anthro department, which had some say over the parapsychology department mostly because of her interest in the subject. She'd been the one to campaign for a parapsych department in the first place. All the interest in New Age phenomena had made them trendy, and Benedek had been one of the first students to sign up. The proud possessor of a shiny, new Masters in parapsychology, he had written a few articles for the *Register*. Edgar Benedek, M.S. Looked good. Then Moorhouse had come down on him like the Mongol Horde. He was a member

of G.I. now. He had responsibilities. There were prestigious journals out there if he wanted to submit stories. That was cool, so Benny tried that a time or two. The first ones came right back with big, red rejection stamps on them. Okay, wrong style. He redid them the way Jonny would have done it. They got accepted. What a hoot. To keep in practice, he wrote up his and Jon-jon's experiences the way he would for old Jordy Kerner at the *Register*, then he did the scholarly approach. He missed the *Register*, but he got to keep his hand in with the Unexplained Phenomena gig. Even Jonathan bought some of it now. He'd seen enough over the past decade to be unable to always scoff it off with 'rational' explanations.

The third haunted house of the afternoon was in a prestigious neighborhood out beyond the university. Wide streets, old places--well, as old as they got out here on the West Coast. Vine-covered walls, a square tower. The owner, a wealthy eccentric who chose to live in a downtown condo, was into the supernatural, and gave Benny the key with glee. "I remember your stories, my boy. A lot of hokum, but fun hokum." He rubbed his bald pate and shifted his dentures around in his mouth. Never heard of Polygrip, obviously. "Write up my ghosts, and it'll be worth the bother of seeing you."

"What kind of ghosts?" Benny had asked eagerly.

"The kind that drift around and look good and spooky. Used to love having my business competitors over for dinner. We'd eat in the grand dining room. Ghosts came through there like clockwork. I'd freak out my guests. Loved every second of it. You go over and write it up." He was getting very far along in years and his grasp of detail was as foggy as Dartmoor when Holmes' gigantic hound was freaking the folks at Baskerville Hall. Great book.

Benny reached the local equivalent of Baskerville Hall in the middle of the afternoon. Parking his rental car, he stood on the sidewalk and ogled the house. It was a brick mid-Victorian, the square tower rising four stories. With eager delight he hurried up the sidewalk to let himself in. Once inside, he took an ectometer stone from his pocket. Jonny always mocked the ectometer stones, but Benny liked them. They changed colors when ghosts showed up. Okay, so they didn't always work, and old Spengs of the Ghostbusters claimed they were a hoax perpetrated at M.I.T by some bored students. It wasn't as if Egon ever loaned out his precious P.K.E. meters that he and Ray had designed to detect the presence of psycho-kinetic energy, and they weren't for sale, even on the black market. Oh well, Benny wasn't here to zap and trap the spirits, just to get a good story.

Closing the door behind him, he focused on the atmosphere of the house. Over the years he'd been in so many haunted houses that he knew what they felt like. The hair on the back of his neck would rise and a really great tingle would shoot up his spine. That didn't happen here but then the ghosts might have a schedule. Instead, his scalp tightened. Danger signal #5. Something was wrong with the place. He held his breath, listening. Nothing. No sound at all. Okay. It was his imagination, that was all. The ectometer stone didn't change color. No ghosts.

He hadn't really wanted to check out haunted houses today. Not when that Ellison guy was pretty obviously a Sentinel. Too many coincidences for him not to be, no matter what excuses Sandburg made for him. He wasn't sure there was a story in it, not unless he hyped it up like crazy. And he wasn't sure he wanted to do that. It wouldn't get him anywhere, and the more he hyped it up, the more he shot down any chance of being *Dr. Benedek*.

Sandburg?

No, dump that. Forget about that kid. What's it to you, anyway?

The kid knew his dad's name.

Long ago, when Benny was a kid and his dad's pals were calling him little Eddie, his pop had decided it might be fun to have a bimbo of the week. Most of them were blonde ditzes with bazooms the size of basketballs, but once in awhile there was one who actually had an IQ in the triple digits. The first one, Naomi Sandburg, was like that. She was the only one Benny had ever thought had anything going for her at all. It was the late '60s and she was a practicing hippie. Benny thought that was cool, and she was a babe too. He was just the right age to suffer from profound hormone attacks and Naomi was just what the doctor ordered--at least to worship from afar. Course pop never let him actually meet Naomi. But he found out a few times where they would be and he'd lurked around, watching from a distance. On one hand, he resented Naomi like crazy. He couldn't really remember his mom, just a few images; her voice singing a lullaby, a blue dress. She died when he was little and after that his grandma raised him. Pop blew in and out of his life, arriving with armloads of presents, and stayed a few exciting

weeks before he blew out of town again. Benny was young enough for major hero worship, and he used to practice fast talking like Pop until he was a master of the art. He didn't want to run cons like his pop did, but he didn't see any reason why he couldn't use a glib line to get what he wanted out of life. Until Jonathan, only Karen, his long-dead fiancée, had ever seen past the line to the man behind it.

Naomi Sandburg. And here was another Sandburg, looked like a hippie with that long hair. Worst of all, this Sandburg knew his dad's name, even if he was vague about where he'd heard it--and looked at Benny with his pop's eyes. Weirdest thing he ever saw. He carefully kept his mind from making the inevitable connection, but he could feel it prowling around in the back of his mind. *No! It's not true.*

Naomi hadn't lasted, but Benny had always suspected she had been the one to dump him, not the other way around. After that, Pop was quick to run through the women. They got seedier and seedier as he aged; the last ones were pathetic, like faded hookers or washed-up strippers. Benny's Ma would have hated that, he knew she would.

This wasn't the kind of thing he could ever tell Jonathan, not he with a dad like St. Leonard the Magnificent. Jonathan's father had won the Nobel Prize, and he had practically been deified in his son's eyes. Jonathan had looked almost pitying when Benny had talked about his father, so he'd never brought the subject up again. He had a feeling it was going to come up whether he wanted it to or not, but maybe the Sandburg kid wouldn't remember where he heard the name. He couldn't have met Big Eddie, not unless Pop went back later, and Benny didn't think he had.

This sucked.

The house was too quiet around him. His unease was growing by leaps and bounds. Maybe it was *not* a good idea to run around a haunted house on his own.

He started toward the door.

He didn't make it.

Jim went with Blair to the restaurant. Sandburg could tell he didn't want to encounter Benedek again but he came, and Blair knew it was because of Naomi's story. He was here to offer his friend moral support and Blair was grateful. When the chips were down, he could always count on Jim.

Blair knew he should call Naomi again, but he couldn't do it yet. He had to think about it, try to come to terms with it. Jim insisted it didn't matter, that Sandburg was still who he had always been, no matter who his father was. Blair knew that was true--in his head. He didn't know it in his heart.

Jonathan MacKensie was waiting at the restaurant, wearing an impatient, anxious expression that made Blair uneasy. He shifted nervously from foot to foot, and he hadn't bothered to remove his coat. When a waitress came up to offer to seat them, he waved her away. "I'm glad you're here," he said urgently. "Benedek didn't come back from the haunted houses. I tried to call you, but you'd left the police station and no one was at your apartment."

"Maybe he found a ghost," Blair offered. Jim ground his teeth.

I had the list of haunted houses and went to each just now. Two of the houses were occupied and he'd been there earlier. The last one was empty. I called the man who loaned him the key and he said Benedek hadn't returned it. When I got there, his rental car was still parked out in front. Mr. Ellison, I know you're a detective, and I know a missing persons report can't be filed so quickly, but I'm afraid Benedek is in trouble. By the time I tracked down your work number, you'd gone and I thought it would be quickest just to meet you. Will you come with me to check the house?"

"Is he likely to get caught up in his work and forget what time it is?" Jim asked practically.

Jonathan hesitated, then gave a reluctant nod. "Yes. He does do that. But if he'd been able, he'd have come to the door."

Blair shook his head. The car parked outside was a dead giveaway; Benedek was probably in trouble. He stared at Jonathan, disquieted. He didn't know Benedek and he wasn't sure if he liked him, but if Naomi's story were true... "Do you think the haunted house might have been something to throw us off? That he's been checking out Jim instead?" It wasn't fair to Jim to bring that up. But Jim didn't look upset, at least with him. Jonathan's concern was real.

"My father and Stephen would have called me if he'd contacted them," Ellison said. "I think we should check that house since his car is there. He may have gotten a ride with someone but we can't let it go. I'll put in a call to my father first and see if he's been pestered." He headed for the pay phone booth.

"Did Benedek say anything about *his* father?" Blair asked involuntarily.

MacKensie looked surprised. "No. I never met his father; he was dead before I met Benedek. I've heard hardly anything about him, but it's enough to make me understand a little why Benedek is...the way he is." He frowned. "What does that have to do with this?"

Blair shook his head hastily. "Nothing. I just wondered. Do you think he could have run into a nasty ghost in the haunted house?"

"Most 'haunted houses' are either hoaxes or misinterpretations. We've investigated enough of them over the past decade. Benedek simply likes to believe. If something's remotely possible, he'll pursue it happily. I know you and Detective Ellison aren't happy with him, but he's really a decent man who's very loyal to his friends. Even to his father, whom I'm not sure deserved it." He raked his hands through his hair. "I just have a bad feeling. If it turns out he just got caught up in what he was doing and spaced the dinner off, I'll wring his neck."

"Jim says I'm a trouble magnet..." Blair offered. Did that mean his half-brother was, too?

Recognition lit Jonathan's eyes. "A perfect term for Benedek. Usually he gets himself out of trouble perfectly well, but not always. Any grey hairs I have are Benedek grey."

Jim came back. "I couldn't get Stephen, but my father says he hasn't seen Benedek or heard from him, either. He doesn't plan to talk to him if Benedek does show up; he was firm about it." He shrugged. Blair knew it was still awkward for him to communicate with his father. Jim put that behind him for the moment. "Shall we go?"

Jonathan pointed out the car parked near the 'haunted house', one of those huge Victorian edifices that filled the ritzy area behind the university. Jim pulled up behind the rental and shut off the truck. It was nearly dark, the streetlights springing to life, the western sky awash in golds and pinks that outlined the house and made it seem to float at the top of the bluff.

Major crimes didn't get too many calls up here; there'd been a spectacular murder/suicide a few blocks away last year, and there were the occasional burglaries but, for the most part, it was a peaceful neighborhood. Some of the older homes had been broken up into apartments that were rented out to students and professors, and those were more likely to cause trouble for CPD, although usually trouble came in the form of noisy parties and some drug possession. There'd been a meth lab not far from here that had been discovered three months ago.

This house stood on the bluff, high above the water, north of the warehouse area. At the foot of the bluff was a marina where the wealthy kept their boats, elegant yachts and cabin cruisers. The houses along here were huge and far apart, so the odds were greatly against any neighbors witnessing Benedek's arrival. No cars passed and no one was visible on the sidewalks.

Sandburg and MacKensie leaped out of the truck the second it stopped. "Hold it right there," Jim cautioned. "The last thing we want to do is rush in without checking it out." He examined the rental, a late-model Taurus; locked. There was enough light from a nearby streetlight to tell the car was empty when he peered in.

The house stood dark and silent. No lights showed in any windows except for a reflected sunset glow fading in the top tower room that must have windows on all four sides. Jim drew his gun.

"You won't shoot Benedek?"

He looked at the professor from Georgetown. "I wasn't planning to. He doesn't annoy me *that* much."

Jonathan smiled wryly, turning his eyes back to the house.

Blair was probably dying to ask Jim if he could sense something, but the question didn't come from him. Instead MacKensie reached out and caught the arm that wasn't holding the gun. "Detective Ellison, I don't know if you have Sentinel abilities or not. But my friend is in trouble. I give you my word of honor that I won't give away any abilities I witness tonight to Benedek or anyone else. If you have any powers or abilities that might help Benedek, I'm begging you to use them."

Jim wanted to explode with every profane word he had ever heard and then invent some new ones. "I'm a cop," he said tightly. "I'll use everything I've got to save an innocent life. It's my job. How I do it doesn't matter as much as the end result. Sandburg, stay behind me. MacKensie, you wait with the truck."

"I'm coming." Jonathan planted defiant feet and met Jim's gaze without flinching. "I've been a paranormal investigator for years. If what's inside that house is paranormal, I'm more qualified to understand it than you are. I have encountered ghosts on several. I don't remember them fondly, but you might need me."

"He's right, Jim. It's supposed to be a haunted house. I don't think bullets can stop ghosts."

"It's an empty house, Chief," Jim said. "They found a meth lab not far from here recently. There could be one in here, too. I don't expect ghosts, Dr. MacKensie. I expect your friend to be caught up in his research, or to have fallen through a hole in the floor. The real danger might be human. You stay behind Sandburg. If I tell you to leave, I *mean* it and I'll expect you to do it without hesitation and without questions. Clear?"

"As crystal. Thank you, Detective." MacKensie fell into step with Blair as they went up the long, curved walk.

Jim had a bad feeling about the place. It was waiting to cause trouble, and it wasn't his Sentinel senses but his cop instincts that told him so. Focusing his hearing on the place, he concentrated. He could hear one person breathing in the basement. Up at the top of the house he could hear someone else. Neither of them believed in using electricity. He didn't know Benedek well enough to tell which was which. If it had been Sandburg, he'd have known from the sound of his heartbeat. But he hadn't been using his senses this morning when the two from Georgetown arrived at the loft. The person on the upper floor was breathing quickly, but the one in the basement might have been asleep--or unconscious. Probably Benedek.

"Let's try a basement window," he suggested. He couldn't tell Sandburg what he'd discovered, not in front of MacKensie. He slipped into the shadows behind the shrubbery, and the two anthropologists followed.

Jim discovered a basement window at the side of the house that was unlocked. It was probably how the crook--if it were a crook--had gotten in. The pry marks on the lock would be obvious even to someone without Sentinel vision. "Someone broke in this way. Not Benedek; he had a key. Someone's been in here who doesn't have the right to be here and these marks look recent. MacKensie, you can come in, but I want you to stay behind me the whole time. If I warn you to leave, I want you to go out the window or the nearest door; I'll tell you which."

MacKensie nodded a confirmation. Jim had a feeling that if they found Benedek injured, the anthropologist wouldn't leave him.

It was dark in the cellar but, since the second presence was at the top of the house, it was safe to use lights. Jim passed his flashlight to Sandburg. Adjusting his vision to the darkness, he led the way, allowing the flashlight beam to appear to direct him. He didn't mean to use his senses overtly while MacKensie was there unless it couldn't be avoided although he believed him when he said he wouldn't tell Benedek about it. MacKensie wouldn't give him away on purpose. But it might come out by accident or under Benedek's expert prodding. The guy was a reporter and sneaky. If he suspected MacKensie knew anything, he'd work on him until the truth slipped out.

The sound of the deep breathing led Jim reached a door that might be a closet or a fruit cellar. He turned the knob carefully, gun in hand. It opened into a room with shelves that had once held canned foods. A glass jar with something ancient and fuzzy in it sat in one corner; another shelf contained a huge collection of Campbell's Soup cans.

Blair's flashlight beam moved past him to land on a prone figure on the floor, head turned toward them, hands bound behind his back, a gag jammed into his mouth. Blood from a cut on his forehead had made a small

puddle on the concrete floor. His eyes were closed, his hair tangled, and his breathing deep; long, shuddering breaths. Benedek's heart was racing.

MacKensie uttered an inarticulate cry of outrage and worry and shoved past Jim to kneel at his friend's side. "Benedek, can you hear me?" He detached the gag with gentle hands.

Blair edged after him and knelt opposite MacKensie, casting a helpless, frustrated glance at Jim. While Jonathan fumbled for a pulse, Sandburg pulled back one eyelid and gazed into an eye that had a huge pupil. "Jim, I think he's been drugged," he blurted out. He might not know consciously how to feel about his half brother, but he knew inside. He was too good a man not to care. "Jim, what do we do?" He and MacKensie undid the bonds that held Benedek

"Keep your voice down," Jim said. "We're not alone in the house."

Jonathan lifted brief, knowing eyes to Ellison's face and his expression acknowledged that Jim was a Sentinel. "Why drug him?" He ran his hands up and down Benedek's arms and legs to check for fractures. "It looks like he was hit on the head. Whoever did this shouldn't need both."

"Come on, man, it's better than shooting him," Blair consoled as they eased Benedek over onto his back. "But doing it on top of a head injury..." He let his voice trickle away at the horror on MacKensie's face.

Jonathan bent over his friend. "Benedek, can you hear me? It's Jonathan. I brought Detective Ellison and Blair. Talk to me. Why are you always *doing* things like this to me?" Obedient to Jim's warning, his voice wouldn't carry beyond the room.

Sandburg fussed, too, in a strange, detached way, chafing the man's other hand. "Come on, Benny, wake up so we can get you out of here."

"I'll call for backup," Jim decided. "This is obviously a police matter." Senses on full alert, he took out his cell phone and punched in the numbers. When he'd arranged for police backup with the promise that it would be there in five minutes, he turned to the others. "I'm going to check out the house."

Blair bounced up like one of those inflatable dolls with a weighted base that kids used to practice punching on. "Jim, not alone. Wait for the backup. This guy's dangerous."

"We don't know that. He could have gotten the drop on Benedek while he was looking for ghosts."

"Benedek has the reactions of a cat," Jonathan said, mopping at the dried blood on the reporter's forehead with a handkerchief. "It's hard to sneak up on him."

"For normal people to sneak up on him, maybe," Jim argued. "The guy who attacked him must be hiding out here. He could be wanted. Can the two of you get Benedek outside?"

"Uh, Jim?" Blair said. "I think he's awake. I think he's been awake all along."

"Awake?" MacKensie cried, then lowered his voice. "Benedek, I could kill you."

"Easy, buds," soothed the reporter. "Can we keep it down to a dull roar. My head wants to blow up and you're all a little fuzzy around the edges."

MacKensie grabbed his hand. "Benedek, what happened to you?"

"Oldest trick in the book, and I fell for it," muttered Benedek. His eyes lingered on MacKensie's worried face, then moved on to Sandburg. The journalist's face tightened up. Did he know about his father's extracurricular activities? Sandburg flinched, then smoothed his face over into that impassive look he wore when he was hurt and didn't want people to know. Jim's jaw clenched.

"This guy came out of one of the rooms up there," he said, waving his hand toward the ceiling. "Said he was a ghost hunter, too. Then he yelled, 'Look out, there's one!' and like a total idiot, I fell for it. He bopped me over the head. Didn't quite take me out, but it was enough to make me stagger around like that wino who thought you were Superman, Ellison. He dragged me down here and tied me up and gagged me, said I was in his way and in a few hours he'd be gone and it wouldn't matter. He whipped out a needle and jammed it in my arm." A shudder passed through him. "That was a tough one. Could've been anything. He said it would keep me out till he was gone, but he had a nasty smile on his face when he said it. So when you came in, I played possum in case he was with you."

Jim stiffened abruptly as something that had been creeping into his senses for the past minute or two suddenly registered. "Smoke! I smell smoke!"

Blair looked up wildly. He sniffed, too, but the smoke must not be strong enough for normal senses to pick it up. Benedek was still groggy enough not to notice, but Jonathan lifted knowing eyes and lowered them again immediately, alarm on his face.

"He torched the place?" Blair guessed.

"I'd bet on it. We're moving--now." Gun in hand, Jim motioned them up, and Blair and Jonathan helped Benedek to his feet.

"Whoops," Benny muttered, swaying. MacKensie slid his arm around the reporter's waist.

"Easy, Benedek. We'll get you out of here."

Jim tensed. "Wait!" He could hear footsteps on the upper stairs. "He's coming. Get back. I'll handle him." He tightened his grip on his gun and focused. Blair switched off the flashlight, pitching the others into darkness. Jim blinked and adjusted his vision.

"He's got night scopes," Benedek warned, half-sagging against MacKensie. "Running around here in the dark, 'cause he doesn't want a light to show."

There no time to ask who the intruder was or to deny that his senses would put him on a par with a man wearing night scopes. Jim headed for the stairs. "Get Benedek out the window." He gestured in that direction.

The smell of smoke was heavier now. Jim saw Blair sniffing the air and his nose crinkled. "Oh, man," he muttered. A faint haze filled the cellar.

Benedek was still unsteady on his feet, but he resisted the pull of his friend and Sandburg, leaning toward Ellison. "Are you kidding? This *is* a story I can write. I started it. I want to finish it."

"Don't be an ass, Benedek." MacKensie manhandled toward the window. "You're nearly out on your feet. The smoke's getting thicker. Let Detective Ellison handle it. That's his job."

Jim held up an abrupt hand for silence. Overhead, footsteps moved across the floor. The others wouldn't be able to hear them because they were soft and cautious, but Jim could track his movements and they were heading toward the staircase opposite the open window. The intruder could have seen them out an upper window. He was probably armed and he knew Benedek was here. "Get out of here," Jim snarled. "No arguments." He jerked a thumb at the window. "Sandburg, *make* them go."

"You heard him." Grabbing his half-brother's arm, Blair yanked him in toward the open window. He and MacKensie guided him, resisting, across the cellar to the open window. Jim waited just long enough to see them push him out before he turned to the stairs. The door opened above him, and he sank into the shadows to cover the others' retreat. Smoke billowed toward him, making it hard not to cough and choke, but no light shone overhead.

A gunshot rang out, painfully loud in Jim's ears. He let out a faint, involuntary yelp, then moved sideways immediately before a second bullet could hit. The first had come so close he had felt the wind of his passage. The second passed through the spot he'd stood a second before. This guy was good. At the window, Sandburg hesitated, his face full of horror. He didn't yell but Jim could see him suppressing the urge with all his might. Benedek leaned back into the window, offering a hand, but Sandburg ignored it and started toward Jim. Benedek grabbed him by the hair and yanked hard. Sandburg staggered back against the wall with a cry of pain and annoyance and grabbed Benedek's wrist to keep his hair from being yanked out by the roots.

"You were meant to stay tied up." The voice above was ominous, malicious, full of such self-confidence that, if Jim had really been an escaping Benedek, he might have lost it. No, scratch that. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Benedek yanking Sandburg backwards out the window. Benedek wouldn't have lost it. More power to him if he could keep Sandburg out of here.

The man at the top of the stairs was tall and dark haired, clad in jeans and a denim jacket. The clothes, boots included, were rough and faded like hand-me-downs. They didn't match the smooth, confident twist of the gunman's mouth.

A disturbance at the window made him look and he repressed a curse as he saw Benedek wiggle back in.

Sandburg grabbed for him, missed by no more than an inch. His fingers actually brushed Benedek's shoulder before the parapsychologists eeled away.

Don't you come in here, Chief, Jim thought fiercely. He wished the Sentinel/Guide relationship included genuine telepathy, rather than just the instincts of two men who knew each other so well.

His lapse of attention must have shown because the man at the top of the stairs turned his head and spotted Benedek. He whipped back to study Jim, registering the gun in his hand. He fired twice in lightning-fast succession, once at Benedek, who blurted out a cry of surprise, and once at Jim, who fired back in the same instant. Something slammed into Jim's arm just below the shoulder and sent him reeling backward. Benedek dropped down to his hands and knees.

In the distance, the approaching wail of sirens announced the arrival of backup.

"JIM!" Sandburg flung himself into the cellar. "Benedek!" The smoke was thicker now. His flashlight came on, outlining the figure on the stairs. Its beam of light appeared to solidify the dancing smoke and pinned the gunman.

Ignoring the pain in his arm and the hot, wet trickle of blood, Jim jerked up his gun fired again before the man could take a second shot. With a choked-off cry, the man pitched down the stairs. His gun went off and the bullet dug a hole in the wall next to Jim. Smoke poured down with the tumbling man. Jim's lungs felt as if they'd been sanded, and his arm hurt like fury, although he recognized it as a flesh wound. Blair's flashlight beam followed the intruder all the way down, then, when the man landed hard, it slid up to Jim, the light picking out the blood on his arm. Sandburg blurted out an inarticulate protest.

"Get out of here, Chief," Jim broke off the command to cough. The fire roared upstairs; he could feel the heat of it as he hovered over the shooter.

"Jim, you're *hit!*" Sandburg wailed. "We need to get *you* out of here."

"Get *him* out of here." Jim waved his good arm at Benny before he went down on one knee to investigate the sprawled body at his feet. The night scopes had gone flying and Jim had his first clear look at the man's face.

"Sanderson!" he blurted, eyes widening in surprise.

"You *know* him?" Benedek was as irrepressible as ever. Jim ran his eyes over the journalist as he bounced to his feet. He, too, sported blood on one arm, but less than Jim. Overhead, the roar and crackle of the flames built to a savage fury. Dancing light from the open door added an eerie lighting to the cellar that was filled with thickening smoke. A crackle of flame started at the top of the steps. At any minute, the ceiling could crash down on them.

"Get out of here!" Jim bellowed hoarsely. "Sandburg, get back. I'll haul this guy over to the window."

"Is he still alive?" Benedek crowded closer. "Sanderson? You mean the terrorist?"

"Jim, come on," Blair urged, trying to see Ellison's wound. He was gasping and panting from the smoke-filled air but that didn't stop him from tugging impatiently at Jim's good arm.

"Benedek, you get him out of here right now," Jim insisted. There was a pulse in Sanderson's neck. The guy had a broken leg and it looked like Jim had hit him both times, one in the shoulder and the one that had brought him down, a graze across the temple that must have rendered him unconscious.

Across the cellar, Jonathan MacKensie screeched Benedek's name from the window. He wouldn't be able to see his partner through the roiling smoke.

Neither man gave ground, Sandburg fussing over Jim's arm and Benedek checking out the downed terrorist. He must have been hiding out here until he could get away, probably by boat. Jim swore mightily, grabbed Sandburg by the arm and muttered in an undertone, "Chief, will you get you--your brother out of here. This place is going to come down on our heads in the next five minutes."

Both men jerked as if they'd been kicked in the gut. They sneaked a look at each other, denial written heavily on each face. The smoke grew so thick it was even hard for Jim to see across the cellar to the open window. In the open doorway above, Jim spotted a wall of flames.

"Jim, which way?" Sandburg demanded, wheezing. "I can't see it." He broke off to cough, bent over

double.

"There." Jim jerked his thumb in the right direction. He could hear MacKensie yelling over there, but he could see through the smoke while Sandburg and Benedek couldn't. Benedek nodded as if Jim's ability to see through the smoke confirmed his suspicions. "Head for MacKensie's voice," he urged.

Then Sandburg bent without speaking to help Jim drag the unconscious man in the direction Jim guided them, Benedek hard on their heels, to the window, where a frantic MacKensie helped by hauling the unconscious man up and out. Sandburg made Jim go next.

"Come on, Jim, you're hit. You're bleeding. Go." He coughed again, but MacKensie reached in for Jim's hand, and he went. He didn't think Sandburg would budge otherwise.

Benedek came out next, protesting all the way. He whirled instantly and he and Jim, ignoring their bullet wounds, hauled Sandburg out just as cops and firemen raced up to guide them away from the side of the burning house. The heat helped beat them back.

As they moved to safety, a familiar shape emerged from the darkness and put out a hand to Jim. "You could have waited to burn the place down until backup got here, Jim." Simon Banks, Jim's boss, raised his voice to be heard above the roar of the fire. "Let's get these men further away from the house."

"It's Sanderson, Captain," Jim explained, jerking his thumb at the unconscious man. Each breath rasped painfully in his lungs, and his head pounded, throbbing worse than the pain in his arm, but he cleared his throat and went on. "He must have been hiding out here, waiting to take a boat from the marina down there." He gestured with his good hand toward the rear of the house. Sandburg hung anxiously at his side, his breathing rough. Behind him, MacKensie, whose breathing was scarcely affected, urged Benedek to sit down. Of course he didn't obey. He planted his feet firmly and listened for all he was worth to every word Jim and Simon exchanged. His pupils weren't quite as big as they'd been when he'd been found, and he was steadier on his feet, but he looked like he'd eaten far too much smoke.

"Sanderson?" echoed Banks in astonishment. "I thought he'd left town three or four days ago. There hasn't been word of him since then."

"He must have gone to ground. Hiding out in an empty house, Captain." That was Benedek, wheezing as he spoke. "I had the key and he grabbed me. This is going to be a *great* story."

"Not a *reporter*, Jim?" Simon groaned as paramedics guided everyone efficiently to the other side of the street. Simon took Jim by the arm and supported him, his other hand reaching out to steady Sandburg. Two EMT's brought a gurney for Sanderson. The terrorist was still unconscious, but Simon had confirmed the identification Jim had made in the smoke-filled cellar. They immobilized his fractured leg and initiated an IV in what seemed like moments. Whirled away in an ambulance with Brown riding along as escort, he'd be under police guard at the hospital and they'd book him when he revived.

The next thing Jim knew, he was sitting on the hood of Benedek's rental car while one EMT set up oxygen for the three of them who had taken the worst of the smoke and another dressed his arm. Sandburg and Benedek, breathing masks in place, sat side by side on the curb, very carefully not looking at each other. The two of them had smoky marks around their mouths and noses, and Jim was pretty sure he looked the same.

Jim remembered Simon's question about reporters. "Actually a graduate student like Sandburg," Jim lifted away his oxygen long enough to reassure Simon, although he still wasn't reassured himself. "He *used* to be a reporter, although he wants to write up Sanderson's capture now."

Sandburg pulled his own oxygen mask away from his face long enough to demand in a smoke-roughened voice, "Are you okay, Jim? Oh, man, when he shot you, I thought..."

The paramedic shoved the mask into place. "Keep breathing it, pal. You took a lot of smoke." Blair accepted it but his eyes fastened on Jim's face and he waited anxiously for a response.

Jim nodded reassuringly and lifted his own mask. "I'm okay. This is just a graze, isn't it?" He slipped the mask into place before his paramedic could object.

"A deep graze, and it'll be sore for a few days, and we'll transport you, but the odds are they won't admit you."

Jim was glad of that. He didn't want to be in the hospital both on general principles and because he had an idea Sandburg would need him around because of this Benedek thing.

Benedek pushed his mask back. "Sanderson! I've heard a lot about him. He's the guy who blew up the lobby of that Seattle hotel. They thought he had headed for Canada, only then he was spotted here."

Glaring reproachfully, MacKensie pushed Benedek's mask into place.

"That's right, we had a tip he'd been spotted here four days ago, but we couldn't find him," Banks admitted. "I ran a check just now. He had an aunt who lived on this street. She died a couple of months ago. I think he may have intended to hide out in her house until he could arrange a boat, but relatives of her husband's moved in last week and foiled his plan. He may have known that house--" he gestured at the burning one-- "was unoccupied. We think he was waiting for a contact to pick him up by boat. Rafe's checking on it now." He gestured in the direction of the marina.

"Too bad about the house," Benedek said regretfully, pushing aside his mask again. His breathing didn't sound too bad. "It was a great place. Wonder where the ghosts will go now."

They all stared at the house. Totally engulfed in flames, it had the undivided attention of what looked like every fireman in Cascade. Water shot through the air from a tangle of hoses, trying to keep it from spreading through the trees. It was a good thing the houses were so far apart. The roar of the fire, the shouts of the firefighters, the pounding of the water all filled the night with sounds so loud Jim turned down his hearing to normal.

"Benedek, you are a *maniac!*" MacKensie cried, his outrage dimly masking his concern. "Going back into that place! Are you nuts! I'm willing to bet you didn't see any ghosts, either."

"Nope, but they were probably lying low. If you were a ghost, would *you* appear to a terrorist? I know *I* wouldn't. Besides, *he* came, too," Benedek defended himself, nodding at Blair without looking at him.

"He came in after his friend," MacKensie insisted. "You're not a reporter any longer. You had no *right* to scare me like that."

"He came in after both of us," Jim corrected. Knowing Sandburg, that was probably true. He'd never have been able to live with himself if he'd let Benedek die, especially with so much unresolved between them.

"Ji-im," Sandburg wailed, horrified. Banks eyed him in surprise and shot a questioning look at Jim.

Jim's paramedic taped the dressing into place and stepped back, evidently having given up on the oxygen. He must have known they'd keep Jim on it for awhile once he got to the hospital.

Benedek turned his head carefully and stared at Sandburg. "You...know about it?" he ventured in such weird tones that MacKensie's jaw dropped.

"I don't know about it," the anthropologist insisted. "Benedek, what is going on here?"

"I had to," Blair said obstinately. "Jim, you were hurt. I couldn't leave you. I'm your partner, your gui--" He cut that off immediately. "And if Naomi's right, he's..."

He couldn't say it. He ventured a cautious look at Benedek. They stared at each other, and it was the first time since he'd met Benedek that Jim had seen him at a loss for words.

Benedek waved a dismissive hand at the paramedic, who threw up his hands in exasperation, and turned back to Sandburg, choosing his words with care. "The thing is, I didn't know if *you* knew about it, even if you knew my dad's name," he said. "But when you looked at me--god, it was like looking into Pop's eyes."

Jonathan's jaw dropped. He stared from Benedek to Sandburg and back again, calculations vivid on his face. "Benedek, what are you saying?" he demanded.

"I knew about Naomi," Benedek continued. "She was a babe all the way. I didn't know about you, not until you mentioned Big Eddie, and then I thought it couldn't be, that the timing was off, all that. But it wasn't, was it?"

Blair shook his head. "No, man. I called her. She said it was true, well, maybe 95% true. I didn't want it to turn out like that. I always thought my old man could have been Jimi Hendrix, or Jerry Garcia or somebody like that. Not..." Simon's eyebrows shot up in startled realization and he cast a quick, querying gift at Jim. Ellison shrugged his shoulders then muttered a curse under his breath as the motion sent a wave of pain through his

injured arm.

Benedek's head bobbed in confirmation. "Yeah. Sorry, Sandburg."

Jonathan winced as he realized what both men were saying. His own father had won a Nobel Prize. He probably couldn't understand. Jim's father had not exactly been Ward Cleaver and he could understand a little. At least his dad hadn't been crooked, even if his parenting techniques had left a lot to be desired.

Jim saw the regret in his friend's eyes and ventured, "You okay, Sandburg?"

"Am I okay? You're the one who was shot!" He dropped his eyes. That was Sandburg for you. Most of the time, he was an open book, telling everybody in the world exactly what he thought about every subject under the sun. But then there were times when he slammed the book closed and all you got was a cover. He was doing that now. Then he lifted his eyes and Jim saw a plea for help in them.

"I'm okay, Chief," Jim said. "And you're gonna be okay, too. You're the same man you've always been, and you're a great person and a great friend. It doesn't matter who your father was? You're still you."

Blair's face blazed into relieved warmth. "Thanks, man." Buoyed up by Jim's encouragement, he turned to Benedek. "You had a crummy deal, too, man. I guess we just live with it from now on."

"Benedek, I didn't know..." Jonathan began. "I'm sorry."

"Are you kidding," Benedek said with false brightness. "Now it's a contest. We've gotta see which of us gets his doctorate first. Can you dig it? *My pop*? Big Eddie, the con man will have two kids with Ph.D's? I can't wait to tell my grandma."

"Grandma?" Blair gasped in surprise. "Jim, did you hear that? I've got a grandma."

Jim thought that was a good start.

"We're ready to transport now," the paramedic said in Jim's ear. "All three of you need to continue the oxygen. You can enjoy the family reunion in a couple of hours." He looked at MacKensie, bore no traces of soot on his face. "You can ride along if you like," he said and shepherded them toward the waiting ambulances. Simon nodded at Jim and moved away.

"I'll need your report tomorrow morning, Jim," he called after him.

Some things never changed.

"Are you all right with this, Benedek?" Jonathan MacKensie demanded the following morning. None of them had been admitted to the hospital but they'd spent a few hours there, breathing oxygen and, in Jim's case, redoing the dressing. They'd also tested Benedek for the drug he'd been injected with, which had proved to be a strong sedative. It was working its way out of his system. By the time they reached the hospital, his pupils were no longer dilated and the doctor was satisfied when his x-rays showed no obvious damage from the blow to the head. He urged Benedek to come back the following morning to make sure and gave Jonathan instructions to monitor him for symptoms of concussion.

They'd separated then, Sandburg and Ellison returning to the loft, and Jonathan and Benedek to their hotel. This morning being Sunday, Detective Ellison was off duty and Blair had no university responsibilities, so the four men planned to meet and go to lunch. Jonathan had dragged Benny, protesting, to the ER for a follow-up exam right after breakfast, and he had been proclaimed fine. The slight graze on his arm was already healing and the drug was out of his system. He didn't even have a headache.

"With the kid being a junior Benedek?" He was silent a moment, craning his neck to read a street sign. "Nah, he's not a bad kid. Guess if I have to be Big Brother Benny, I can live with it. You should have seen Dad's *other* girlfriends. At least he picked the best one to..." His voice trailed off. "This should be Webster," he said in annoyance. "And it's Kensington. Where the heck is Webster."

"It's the next street, Benedek. Come on, talk to me. It isn't every day a man gets a brother fully grown."

"Half-brother," Benedek corrected, then he shrugged. "Okay, you're right, Hawkeye. There's Webster." He flipped on the turn signal and headed down the street.

"Benedek, if you want me to stop talking about it, just say the word."

Benedek sneaked him a sideways glance before returning his attention to the road. "It'll be great for the talk shows," he said lightly.

Jonathan knew from experience not to take that remark at face value. "You aren't doing talk shows anymore," he reminded his colleague. "Blair Sandburg is a decent man. Maybe he's a little out there with the Sentinel thing--" He owed Jim and Blair that-- "but he and Jim are men I'd trust."

Benedek was silent a long moment, then he burst out with something that surprised Jonathan down to his socks. "Yeah, and Moorhouse would respect Blair at first sight."

"Benedek--"

"She told you I was a cretin, that she would like to keep me out of North America altogether."

"That bothered you? I thought you felt sorry for her because she didn't see the full Benedek potential. That maybe one day she'd see you for your real value--the way she does now."

"Are you kidding, Jonny. She'd rather I was affiliated with the University of Pakistan than Georgetown, and you know it. But she'd welcome my kid brother with open arms and heap laurels on his head for his Sentinel research. He isn't any more mainstream than I am, but he wins hands down."

Jonathan had never expected that reaction. Benedek was taking this a lot worse than he'd let on. "Come on, Benedek. Benny. Where's the man who's convinced he's right 'with the whole round world agin ye'?"

"I *am* right," Benedek said, his eyes widening slightly at the quote. "But that doesn't mean I'm not the Rodney Dangerfield of G.I. I don't get no respect."

"When did you start wanting it?" Jonathan smiled suddenly. "I wish you could have been there when Moorhouse read your masters' thesis. She started out skeptical, muttering about articles in the *Register*. I sat back and watched her and she grew more and more surprised. When she was finished, she turned to me and said, 'I assume this is what you've always seen in him.'"

Benedek stared, eyes open wide. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Word of honor. Do you want to know what I told her?"

Benedek slanted him an extremely suspicious glance then concentrated religiously on a major intersection. He didn't reply, but Jonathan took that as permission.

"I told her that it was only a part of what I've always seen in you. I said that you and she shared so many interests in the paranormal that the only thing she'd ever objected to was, er, the packaging. And I reminded her that she had always enjoyed your encounters. She denied it, of course, but it was true."

"Course it was true, Dr. Jon. People *a/ways* enjoy me. Can't be beat."

"In bullshit?" Jonathan teased. Benny's eyes sparkled.

"You wouldn't want the same relationship with Dr. Moorhouse that your brother would have," Jonathan pointed out. "It isn't how you're made. He's a scholar, a little like me. I think if you could get along with me, you can get along with him. Besides, Jim says he likes all those weird foods you like. You may be on opposite sides of the continent, but you can get together every now and then and run up long distance phone bills."

"Assuming he even wants to," Benedek said casually, as if it didn't matter. "He isn't you, with your quotes from Kipling. Aha! You didn't think I knew what you were quoting, did you? 'But the thousandth man will stand your friend with the whole round world agin you.'" He added more quietly, "Thanks, Jonathan."

"Blair has his own 'thousandth man', doesn't he?" Jonathan said thoughtfully.

Benedek's face sobered. "Oh yeah, the Sentinel. He could see right through that smoke in the basement."

"Perhaps he has a superb sense of direction."

"Maybe," Benedek agreed. "Hey, is this Prospect?" He made a hasty turn without bothering with the turn

signal, followed by the outraged beeping of a taxi. "Let's do this," he said. But the light of challenge shone in his eyes. Jonathan smiled, satisfied that his friend would be all right.

"You okay with all this, Chief?" Jim Ellison asked.

"Sure, I'm fine, Jim." Sandburg was wearing his inscrutable face this morning. "Come on, the doc said you ought to wear a sling today."

"I don't need a sling. I'm not going anywhere, just sitting around. You'd think I was an invalid."

"You aren't one to sit back, put your feet up, and expect to be waited on hand and foot, are you?" Blair kidded.

"Are you kidding? Now if you were female, Sandburg..."

"Shall I call your latest girlfriend. What's her name? Shelley? She can come by and do a little brow stroking. You kid me about my style with the ladies, but you go through a lot more women than I ever do."

Jim grimaced. "Old history, Sandburg. I'm *fine*. We were talking about *you* last I checked. Benedek and MacKensie will be here any minute. Anything you want me to do?"

Blair hesitated, then he gave Jim one of his blazing smiles. "Thanks, man. Having you stick with me like this is *great*."

"We're partners," Jim insisted. "That's what partners do. Look, I'm not much good at the brother gig. Stephen and I are still working it out. So it's not like I can give you any advice."

"Not advice so much, Jim. And you're wrong. I don't know about Stephen and you, but when it comes to me, I know you've got it in you to be a *great* brother. Just...stick around, okay?"

"Hey. I'm an 'invalid', remember? It's not like I'm going anywhere, or Mother Hen Sandburg will have a fit." Jim felt warmed by Sandburg's praise.

Blair's smile grew. "Thanks, man," he repeated, just as there came a knock at the door. Jim had heard them coming. Today, he recognized the sound of their footsteps.

Benedek led the way with MacKensie hovering protectively behind him. They'd been a team a lot longer than Jim and Blair had, but he recognized the condition.

"Yo, bro," Benny said airily, bouncing in. "Looking better today."

"So are you. At least your pupils are normal." Blair stood back to let them in. "Are you okay today?"

Sandburg usually didn't sound so stiff, but it wasn't every day he met a brother he hadn't known he had.

"He's fine," Jonathan said. "I made sure he wasn't malingering. This is better than the time we were in Hooperville and he had an out-of-body experience."

"Are you kidding? A real OBE?" Sandburg burst out. "Oh, man, that is so cool."

Benedek beamed. "My own invisible, floating-through-walls extravaganza. I made a full round of the talk shows on that one. You should have seen Carson--he was still doing the Tonight Show back then. He really got off on weird things like that. It was great."

"*He* thought it was great," Jonathan complained. "I had to do the other end of it, believing he was dying. They were using the paddles on him. I swear, he's been rough on *my* heart all these years." He added, "You don't know what you're getting into, Blair."

Everybody tensed at that. Jim could hear a couple of heartbeats thudding like drums.

Then Sandburg did something that made Jim prouder of him than he'd been through this whole experience. He produced a faint but genuine grin and stuck out a hand to Benedek. "If I can take running with a cop for nearly three years, I can take this."

Jim held his breath until Benedek took Blair's hand, then he exchanged a relieved grin with MacKensie.

"One other thing," Benedek said quickly when the handclasp ended. "Ellison. I know the whole thing. The Sentinel gig. That'd give you your own round on the talk shows. But it would probably cause you more problems than good stuff, so I'm gonna pretend I never had a clue. Sentinel? What's that?" He raised his hand and pantomimed zipping his lips together. "Besides, that's my baby brother's gig, not mine."

"*Baby* brother?" Blair exploded in good-humored outrage. "No way. Brother, I'll buy, but *baby* brother?" He shuddered.

"Your gig anyway," Benedek said, shamelessly unrepentant. "Besides, you haven't met my doctoral advisor. Moorhouse would eat me for breakfast without butter and jam if I even tried." He turned back to Jim. "Your secret's safe with me. Word of honor."

"And if he gives his word of honor, he means it, Detective," MacKensie reassured him. "I've known him over twelve years, and he's never once broken his word in the entire time I've known him."

Jim didn't want to admit it, even now, but he saw Sandburg looking at him expectantly, eyes full of trust. "Thanks, Benedek," he said. It was the most he could bring himself to say but it was enough. Blair relaxed, satisfied.

"We've got a lot to talk about," he said to Benedek. "We didn't get to have dinner last night so how about lunch? I know this great little health food place--"

"A soul brother, too," crowed Benedek. "You're on, little bro."

Blair winced but not as badly as he had at the 'baby brother' appellation. "What do you say, Jim?" he asked. "Lunch at Guido's? Come on, you've done it before."

"Under pain of death."

"Benedek, if you're going to feed me another tree bark and anchovy surprise--" MacKensie objected.

"Hey, I've had that, man," cried Blair. "It's really great for you. Jim, you'll love it."

Ellison doubted it very much. He caught MacKensie's eye across the room, and the two of them acknowledged the amusing difficulties that went with their friendships. Then he looked at Sandburg, rattling off the names of bizarre and esoteric dishes to Benedek, who capped them with even greater horrors of his own.

He looked back at MacKensie, and both of them grimaced, then nodded.

It was worth it.